

Mystery of the

SECRET SANTA



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

Mystery of the Secret Santa

Shanna Swendson

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Also by Shanna Swendson
About the Author

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter One

I hadn't even admitted it to my closest friend, but one of the main reasons I'd been willing to take the job as editor of the *Stirling Mills Gazette*, in spite of my job interview being disrupted by a murder that I'd initially been accused of, was that this was a town right out of my dreams. More accurately, it was a town right out of the romantic TV Christmas movies I gorged on throughout the holiday season. There were fewer bakeries and quaint shops—though the local billionaire who was trying to revive the town was working on that—but there was a picturesque downtown area where I had a cute apartment over the newspaper office, there were plenty of festivals that brought the townspeople together, and there was even the hunky local guy I alternately sparred and bonded with.

Now it was actually the holiday season, and I was looking forward to getting to truly indulge all my fantasies of living in one of those movies. There would probably be less snow, since this was Texas, but that wasn't entirely out of the question. The first time I'd come to this town, I'd ended up getting stranded by an ice storm, so it could happen.

Normally, the Saturday evening after Thanksgiving was when I kicked off my Christmas movie viewing season. I'd get home from spending the holiday with my parents, put on my coziest pajamas, make some cocoa, and curl up on the sofa to watch city girls go to small towns and fall in love with the towns, with Christmas, and

with a guy. This year, however, I was going to live it instead of watching it. Saturday night kicked off the Stirling Mills holiday festivities, and I was going to soak it all up. It even counted as work, since this was a major local event I needed to cover for the newspaper. As I got ready to go out, I felt like a little kid on Christmas Eve, about to burst with anticipation.

It was a bit too warm to dress like a Christmas movie heroine, so I skipped the coat and hat and settled for draping a scarf over a festive sweater. I didn't really need the scarf, but I wanted to at least pretend to dress seasonally. A glance out my bedroom window that overlooked Main Street told me that crowds were gathering for the holiday light parade, but nothing had begun. Over the past couple of weeks, I'd noticed crews wrapping strings of lights around lampposts and storefronts, and I couldn't wait to see all the lights turned on.

I headed downstairs to stake out a spot in front of the newspaper office. Normally, I watched parades from my bedroom, which had an unobstructed, panoramic view, but I wanted to be among the people for this to really soak up the atmosphere. Sitting alone in my window above it all would feel lonely.

Once I was outside, though, I realized that there was a certain loneliness to being by myself in a crowd. It seemed like everyone was part of a group. There were families with small children in strollers or sitting on their parents' shoulders, couples with their arms around each other, and groups of friends. I felt conspicuously alone. I did have friends. They just happened to be busy tonight. Margarita Reyes's restaurant would be hopping on a night that brought so many people downtown. Jordan Randall, the local boy turned software billionaire who'd returned to his hometown, was the force behind the festivities and was surely tied up in last-minute details. My assistant, Charlene Robinson, was probably helping wrangle grandkids. And Wes Mosby, along with the rest of the police department, would be working, providing security for the event and directing traffic while Main Street was blocked off

for the parade. I scanned the crowd for police uniforms, particularly any that might be accompanied by auburn hair, but I didn't spot him. I couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment, since so many of my Christmas movie fantasies starred him. He needed to be nearby for this to be perfect.

I did notice one other friend who wasn't occupied with something else. Ruthie was an artist who lived and worked in a studio across the street from the newspaper office. She sat in her wheelchair, her service dog at her side, next to a lamppost in front of her studio. The parade hadn't started yet, so I darted across the street to join her. "Hey," I said. "I guess this is a big deal here, huh?"

"It's actually a pretty new tradition," she said. "The decorations used to be not much more than some sad tinsel and a few lights on the lampposts, and the parade wasn't too different from what they do for everything else, but Jordan got inspired by what some other towns have done, and he started all this last year. He hopes it'll bring in tourists. I honestly didn't see a huge difference in the number of people downtown most nights last year, but maybe word will have spread and there will be more people this year."

I glanced around. "This seems like a pretty good turnout, but I don't know how many are local."

"I think there are people here from the surrounding rural areas and some other nearby towns. I don't know about tourists from Dallas, Austin, or even Waco. I think we've got a ways to go before we're an actual destination."

I heard distant drums approaching, and soon a police motorcycle appeared, indicating the start of the parade. Behind it came a horse-drawn carriage. The carriage stopped a block down the street from where I was, and a woman in an evening gown stood inside the carriage. According to the press release about this event, she was the previous year's Christmas Queen—this town had a queen for everything. She raised her scepter and began a countdown that the crowd picked up. After we'd all shouted,

“One!” she signaled with the scepter, and suddenly the town lit up.

The sight took my breath away. Every building in the downtown area was outlined in colored lights. All the windows up and down the street were also outlined in lights. Some of the buildings had even more elaborate displays in their windows or around their awnings. There were lights on the lampposts and strings of lights draped back and forth across the street, creating a canopy of light. At the same signal, the parade had lit up. The queen’s carriage was outlined in tiny lights, and all the vehicles and marching groups behind her also had lights. The parade moved forward to the accompaniment of the high school marching band playing “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.”

I couldn’t help but grin as glowing trucks drove slowly by, people in back flinging peppermints to the crowd. It was enough to melt the heart of a steely businesswoman who’d come to town to close the local ornament factory, and this was only the beginning. There would be a whole month of holiday festivities. I had the events on my calendar so I wouldn’t miss a thing.

Tonight was the kick-off parade, ceremonial lighting of the town—which I’d just witnessed—and the lighting of the town Christmas tree at the park near the railroad tracks. The tree at the city park near the river would be lit Tuesday night. There would be festivals each weekend, mostly focused on the downtown area, so as to draw in business. The old movie theater on Main Street had a full slate of holiday films and shows scheduled. I was looking forward to watching classics like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* on the big screen in a theater that might have shown them during their initial runs. The local community theater would perform a production of *A Christmas Carol*, and there would be a singalong showing of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Each weekend, there would be carriage rides and hayrides through the downtown area and around the adjacent historic districts, where many of the old homes had been decked out for the holidays, and carolers would stroll around the business district. I

couldn't imagine how much all this was costing Jordan, and I wasn't sure how much business it would actually bring to the town.

But, for the moment, I turned off the logical side of my brain and just enjoyed it all. I wasn't quite like those Christmas movie heroines who had somehow managed to get through life without experiencing Christmas, so that a Christmas tree lighting was the most magical thing she'd ever seen. I'd grown up in an air force family, so I'd lived overseas. I'd experienced Christmas in an English village and had visited German Christmas markets. I'd gone shopping on Oxford Street in London. But there really was something about a small town going all-out like this. The sense of community created an atmosphere that you didn't get in some of the other places I'd been for the holidays. It reminded me somewhat of the English village, though there had been a lot fewer lights there.

"I think this may be overkill," someone near me said.

I had to give myself a moment to get my reaction under control and settle the butterflies that had come to life in my stomach when I recognized Wes's voice before I turned to look at him. "Bah, humbug," I teased.

"There's gotta be a happy medium between Scrooge and all this," he said.

"A few tasteful strands of lights?" I suggested.

"Exactly."

"A few tasteful strands of lights won't draw tourists," Ruthie said. "You need the kind of overkill that'll fill up Instagram."

Once the marching band had passed, recorded Christmas music filled the air. A speaker on the lamppost over Ruthie blared "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," forcing us to raise our voices to continue the conversation.

"We'll see," Wes said. "I don't see too many people I don't recognize, so I don't know that all this is going to give us any extra benefit."

“It’s bringing the community together, and it’s fun,” I argued.

“You may feel differently after a few weeks of not being able to get in and out on weekends and evenings. And I hope you have light-blocking shades on your bedroom windows. And earplugs.”

“I can’t imagine getting sick of this. It’s only a few weeks, and having it on my doorstep is awesome. I don’t have to find a parking space or drive to get here.”

“This is only the first night. I’ll check with you about how you feel next weekend.”

I wondered how he would take it if I suggested he join me for some of the activities, like maybe one of the movies. We’d seemed to be coming close to moving our relationship to a new phase, but then both of us had backed off. I’d become cautious after considering how it might look to the town if the newspaper editor was involved with one of the senior police officers. We ran into each other a lot in the course of our work, and I was worried about the appearance of a conflict of interest. I didn’t know what his deal was, if he’d also changed his mind or if maybe he was picking up on something from me that made him back off. Considering that he could actually read minds, that was entirely possible.

“I’m going to head down to the park for the tree lighting after the parade ends,” I said, the invitation implied in my tone.

“Enjoy,” he said brusquely.

“I take it you aren’t a big fan of Christmas.”

“It’s not my favorite holiday.” Before he could elaborate, his radio squawked, and he stepped away to respond. I couldn’t hear what he said or what was coming over the radio without losing my spot for watching the parade, and I was torn. There was the possibility of a story, but on the other hand, it was likely to be the sort of thing that would just end up in the police blotter, while the festival was the big feature that I could only properly report on by experiencing it.

I was even more torn when I saw Wes jog off. I had no idea where he was going and didn’t stand a chance of following him,

especially if he got in a police car and drove to a crime scene. I'd have to run to my office, hope the resident ghost had been listening to the scanner to pick up on the radio communication to know where the incident was, then get my car and fight the traffic and navigate around roads closed for the parade. I decided to stay put and do any follow-up on whatever was happening later.

"Maybe you should just tell him," Ruthie said.

"Huh? What?" I replied.

"Look, anyone can see there's something going on between you two. I don't know what's holding you back, but things could get ugly if you don't talk about it. You'll make the wrong assumptions. Just say what you feel and why you're not acting on it, then see where he stands and figure out where to go from there."

"I don't think it's that easy."

"But it can't be resolved if you don't do anything about it. Secrets have a way of complicating things. You've got to get it out in the open to deal with it."

"Well, if I ever get five minutes without him being called away for work."

"Mmm hhh," she said. A blare of siren interrupted anything else she might have said, and a fire truck passed us, with Santa Claus riding on the back, waving to the crowd while his elves tossed candy. Behind the truck was a police motorcycle, signaling the end of the parade. "Well, I'd better get inside in case anyone wants to see the studio," Ruthie said. "Have fun." She wheeled herself around and headed back to her studio, which had been lit up like everything else on the street. The festive lights and decor were an odd contrast to her stark modern art.

Alone once more, I turned and followed the flow of the crowd strolling down Main Street toward the park. The speakers blared "Silver Bells," and I found the lyrics about Christmas in a city particularly apt. The downtown had been totally transformed. The usually empty storefronts were filled with pop-up shops selling seasonal wares. One had been turned into an old-fashioned candy

store, and there was another selling gingerbread, with the aroma of baking spices wafting out to the sidewalk. I was pretty sure it was artificial, since there were no ovens in that shop and the goods had to have been baked elsewhere. There were also a couple of shops selling a variety of ornaments. It reminded me of the German Christmas markets, only in shops instead of in booths in the town's market square.

I wondered how Jordan had managed to pull it all together while also getting his new house built and running several businesses. I made a mental note to schedule an interview with him. That was a story I might even be able to sell to a publication outside the town.

As I passed Margarita's restaurant, I noticed that there was a line waiting to get in and be seated. That was good for her, but it meant I likely wouldn't be able to hang out much with her for the next few weeks. I might also have to eat more meals at home if all the downtown restaurants were busy. Maybe this was just the excitement of the opening night, along with people being sick of turkey and wanting to eat something completely different.

I found that the park was even more festive than Main Street had been. The gazebo was outlined in lights, and colored lights were arranged in scenes around the park, flashing in time with the music that was playing on the speakers and giving the illusion of wagon wheels turning and elves working to make toys, based on which lights lit up at any given moment. The giant tree in the middle of the park was a dark void.

While I waited for the tree-lighting ceremony, I bought a cup of cocoa from a stand. It wasn't quite cold enough for me to need the warm beverage, but I figured it was part of the ambience. At least the weather was comfortable for standing around outside, even if it didn't feel seasonal.

A trumpet fanfare heralded the arrival of the Christmas Queen. She stepped up to the tree. There was another countdown, she waved her scepter, and then the tree burst forth with light. Lights

on the tree were synchronized with the music, creating patterns that matched the song playing on the speakers. It was a lot more high-tech than your typical tree, and I made another mental note for a potential story. I was sure people would be curious about how it was all done.

Once the tree had been lit, I felt somewhat at loose ends. There weren't any additional events scheduled for the evening, and I didn't see anyone I knew well enough to approach and try to join their group. I wandered around, admiring the decorations, then decided there would be no harm in going home and starting my holiday movie viewing. After all, all this was right outside my front door, and I'd have a month to enjoy it. I could save some sights to see later.

I strolled up Main Street, looking at the opposite side of the street from my walk to the park. Along the way, I kept my eyes peeled for Wes, in case he'd come back. There were cops keeping an eye on the crowds, but Wes wasn't among them. That made me really wonder what had happened.

I got back to the office and checked the press room, where the police scanner was. Jean Jacobs, the former editor and current ghost who thought she was still running the newspaper from beyond the grave, liked to monitor the scanner because it made her feel more in touch with the outside world, but she wasn't there. I headed upstairs to my apartment, changed into my pajamas, and settled down to watch the first Christmas movie of the year.

When I went to bed, I got a sense of why Wes had said I'd need room-darkening shades. Even with the blinds and curtains closed, enough light from outside made its way to my bedroom to make sleep difficult. I found the sleep mask that had come with an airline amenity kit and put it on. I could still hear the music, but it was soothing. The music cut off at eleven and the lights at midnight, so it wasn't too bad.

Sunday evening, I made another round of the downtown area, taking in the sights. I ran into Wes, on duty watching a spot on the

corner. "What happened last night that had you tearing off?" I asked.

"I didn't tear off."

"Jogging off" doesn't sound nearly as dramatic."

"An attempted robbery at a gas station convenience store, but nothing came of it. The clerk spotted him on his way in and hit the alarm, which scared him off. We've had a wave of armed robberies, so it was worth following up on."

"Yeah, I've seen those in the police blotter. If it's the same person, they must be local to be hitting over and over again."

"I figure it's a kid doing it just for the thrill. He never takes enough for it to amount to a felony, usually nothing more than a candy bar and, based on the surveillance footage, I don't think it's even a real gun. He may be more at risk than his victims if he messes with the wrong person who shoots as soon as he sees a gun, so I want to catch him and put a stop to it." He frowned and added, "I'd prefer not to have this turned into a big story, though. I don't want the guy to know how much we've guessed about what he's up to."

And this was the core of what seemed to be putting our relationship on hold. We were attracted to each other and liked each other, but there were issues like this, with him telling me things but asking me not to write about them. So far, I hadn't had a huge conflict, since I generally agreed about what was suitable for publication, but he was bound to feel betrayed at some point if I disagreed with him about what I should write and put the newspaper first, and I was bound to get some criticism within the town (or from Jean) if I sat on something for his sake. Meanwhile, he still acted like he wasn't sure he could trust my judgment, even though he'd seen how I worked and I didn't feel like I'd given him any reason to doubt me.

"I do think there's some concern about a string of robberies that the public might need to know about," I said, "but I can see that you don't want to publicize that you know he's probably not

entirely serious. I'll run what you give me for the police blotter, but if it keeps up, I may have to do a story or people will wonder why the paper has been mostly silent."

"Fair enough," he said with a nod. He glanced around the downtown scene. "So, are you still enjoying the festivities?"

"I saw what you meant about the lights being a bit of a bother when I'm trying to sleep, but they shut them off at midnight. I checked, and it'll be earlier on weeknights, so it's not so bad. I just put on my sleep mask, and I was fine. It's only a month. And I don't even have to put up my own decorations with all this right outside. I may still put up a tree, though." I barely stopped myself from adding that it would be important for the movie-watching ambience. I hadn't yet confessed that particular weakness to him.

"Uh huh," he said, sounding skeptical.

"Oh, come on, this doesn't spur the slightest bit of holiday spirit for you?"

"This isn't my idea of holiday spirit. It's noisy and crowded and a huge target for potential crime or violence."

"So you're more into cozy evenings by the fire? Making popcorn strings for the Christmas tree and singing carols?" I was up for that, too.

"You'd have to run the air conditioner to have a fire right now."

It didn't look like I could goad him into telling me what he did like. Maybe instead of the city girl and local guy story, this was more like the movies in which someone had a bad experience with Christmas and had to learn to love it again. As I headed off to walk around downtown, I found myself pondering what I could do to help him find his joy—and maybe love, while I was at it.

I'd already forgotten about the convenience store robberies by the time I returned home after a circuit of the downtown area. That meant that when I got a phone call in the office late Monday afternoon, it took me a moment to remember what was going on when the caller said, "I have a tip about the convenience store robberies."

“Oh, yeah, I heard about those,” I said, picking up a pen and preparing to take notes. “What’s your tip?”

“I know who’s doing it.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Two

As much as I would have loved to break a big story, I couldn't just run with whatever someone told me. I needed some corroboration. "Have you talked to the police about this?" I asked the caller.

She sighed—the voice was that of a woman, probably young. "They won't listen."

"You could try. I've found that some officers on the force are pretty open-minded."

"I *did* try. They didn't believe me." She sounded like she was on the verge of tears of frustration.

"May I ask who you are?"

"Do I have to tell you?"

"I can't know whether to believe you if you don't tell me. And I'm definitely not putting something like this in the newspaper without knowing the source."

There was a long hesitation, and then she sighed again before saying, "Meg Nichols. I work at the store that was almost robbed Saturday night. That's the third time he's hit my store when I was working. And I know who he is."

"How do you know?"

"I go to school with him, so I know him, even when he has a ski mask on."

"You recognize his clothes? Or the way he walks?"

"Um, something like that."

“But the police won’t consider it?”

“They say it’s not enough to go on. The things I noticed aren’t distinctive enough. His clothes are things anyone could wear. They made me look at a bunch of surveillance footage from other robberies, and I couldn’t pick out which one involved what they think is the same guy from the same string of robberies. Apparently, the video I thought was him was from a robbery that happened when the guy I said did it was in public somewhere else. So, they dismissed what I said.”

And I could see why. “I’d love to help break a case, but I can’t run an allegation in the newspaper without something to back it up. If there hasn’t been an arrest, I can’t put a name in the newspaper. I’d get sued for libel, and it would fall under reckless disregard for the truth, so I’d lose.”

“But not if he’s guilty, right?”

“I’d have to prove it.”

“I *can* prove it! I know Cliff Raglan is doing it.”

“How can you prove that?”

“I just know, and if someone would investigate him, or follow him, or something, then you’d get evidence.”

“That’s a job for the police. I could get in trouble doing that.”

“Ughh!” she cried out, then she hung up. I felt bad for her because I knew how frustrated she must be to think she knew who was guilty but not be able to get anyone to do anything about it. I had a talent for seeing and hearing ghosts, but I couldn’t print anything they told me unless I found other evidence to back it up. Even though Wes knew about and believed in my talent, he needed something more before he could act on one of my ghostly tips.

I wondered if she had one of the uncanny abilities common in this town and that had something to do with how she knew who the robber was. During the Depression, a carnival sideshow had been stuck in town, and it seemed that a lot of their acts weren’t just acts. These people really had strange abilities and, nearly a century later, a lot of people in the town could do things that

couldn't ever go on a police report or in the newspaper. Just recently, a man had committed a classic "locked room" murder by using telekinesis to lock the interior deadbolts from outside.

"Hot tip?" a voice said. Jean didn't appear until a second later, so it was as though the voice had come from thin air.

"Nothing I can run with unless I want a lawsuit." If Cliff was related to the Raglans I knew of, they probably had lawyers on retainer. Walter Raglan owned the construction company that built most of the new houses in the town. A decade ago, he'd been a decidedly blue-collar carpenter, but then the town had begun growing rapidly and he'd been the one building a lot of the new houses. He'd started his own contracting firm, and now he was one of the richest people in town. A rich kid robbing stores just to terrorize the employees and trusting that his dad's lawyers could probably get him out of trouble wasn't a farfetched idea, and if it was true, he needed to be taken down. The tricky part would be figuring out how to do it without losing the newspaper and everything I owned.

"Lawyers take all the fun out of everything," Jean said with a snort, but I noticed that she didn't urge me to pursue the story. She was all for aggressive journalism, but she also had a strong ethical code.

Outside, the holiday lights blinked on and the music began playing. Jean threw up an arm to block her eyes, then drifted to the window. "What's going on out there?"

"You didn't notice the commotion the past two nights?"

"It was the weekend. I don't have to spend all my time on this plane."

"I hear they started this last year."

"The guy who was here before you never listened to me, so there wasn't much point in hanging around. I took a year or so off to just be dead."

"They didn't do Christmas lights in your day?"

"Not like this. They had tinsel and some colored lights on the

lampposts. This looks like Las Vegas.”

“You’ve been to Vegas?”

“I wasn’t tied to this building when I was alive. I traveled. They have a lot of journalism conferences in Vegas.”

“It’s supposed to bring in tourists who want to experience a small-town Christmas.”

“A small-town Christmas shouldn’t look like Vegas.”

“There are several towns in the state doing this sort of thing, and it makes them a lot of money. We’ll see if it happens here. I don’t think there’s anything else quite like it in this part of the state. I’m guessing the downtown wasn’t a huge tourist draw in your day.”

“It was before the war, back when the roads weren’t great and this was your only place to go shopping if you didn’t want to spend a whole day getting to Waco or Dallas. That building down the block used to be a nice department store. This whole street was full of shops. You could get everything you needed without leaving town. You should have seen the Christmas season then. There were so many people here shopping. Then they built highways that bypassed us, people started moving away from farms, they built those big chain discount stores at the edge of town, and the downtown just sort of withered. By the time I died, the newspaper was about the only thing still open around here.”

“This must be an improvement, then. The downtown area is coming back to life, and if more people come here, there will be more businesses. That’s good for the town, right?”

“Maybe.” She squinted out the front window. “It’s so bright.”

“That would be the LED lights. They’re more energy-efficient while also being bright. You should see the park. They’ve got a computer-controlled display that synchronizes the lights to music, so they blink on and off in different colors.”

“I prefer something more subtle, like candles.”

“They’re doing a candlelight event at the city park tomorrow night.”

Jean drifted away, and I went out to Main Street to take in a little atmosphere before going upstairs and finding a Christmas movie to stream while I ate a microwaved frozen dinner. I thought about calling Wes to get his side of the robbery story, but I figured he was either pulling double duty and having to work security for the downtown holiday events or he was enjoying a rare night off and deserved to be left alone.

The next morning, I did call him. "I wanted to check in with you about the string of convenience store robberies," I said. "You don't have a suspect?"

I could hear his weary sigh over the phone. "Let me guess, Meg called you."

"She seemed pretty sure about who it was."

"And yet she couldn't identify the guy from security footage. I would suggest you not run with what she told you."

"I'm not planning to. I just wanted to get your side of the story and find out why you're not investigating this guy."

"I didn't say we aren't. We just can't arrest him based on what she said, and if he knows we're watching him, that may change how he acts. We have to be careful with this one."

"Okay, then, mum's the word. I wouldn't run his name without evidence, anyway. And now I've done my due diligence."

I waited for him to make it very clear that I should stay out of this, but he surprised me by just saying, "Thanks."

"Are you going to be working the tree lighting at the park tonight?" I asked, remembering what Ruthie had said about just talking to him. I wasn't sure I wanted to go that far, but I thought that sounding him out for doing something together was a good step.

"Yeah," he said, with another weary sigh. "I don't know how many trees we need to light up."

"This one is different, and it'll be the first impression for a lot of visitors. You pass the park on the way in to town."

"But I notice that this ceremony is on a weeknight. I guess we

don't want to draw the crowds away from the business district on a weekend. There aren't as many places to spend money around the park."

"Sounds smart to me." If a bit cynical. "I guess I'll see you there, then."

Instead of saying something like, "I'm looking forward to it," he said, "You haven't had your fill of all this holiday stuff yet?"

"It's barely December. I'm just getting started."

"We'll see how you feel in a couple of weeks."

THE MAIN CITY park was on the edge of town, on the bank of the river that ran past the town and across from the old mill (now a restaurant) that gave the town its name. It was a fairly rustic park, just a piece of land with a few picnic tables, a footpath that wound around it, and a gazebo. The town mostly used it for events that couldn't take place downtown, like fireworks displays.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I arrived. On a weeknight, I doubted there would be too many people attending, but I was surprised to find the parking lot fairly full. Luminarias lined the path from the parking lot to the park and then outlined the footpath around the park. Softly glowing paper lanterns hung from tree branches, making the park look magical. I realized why the parking lot was full when I noticed the number of choirs that were there. One group sang in the gazebo while others clustered behind it, waiting their turn. It looked like every church choir in town was there, and this town had a lot of churches. The rest of the people attending the event appeared to have come with the choir members.

Booths offering cocoa and cookies had been set up, and I got a cup and a cookie. They were part of the ambience, I rationalized. Besides, my new nightly habit of walking up and down Main Street to enjoy the holiday atmosphere meant I was getting a lot more

exercise than usual. As I enjoyed my treats, I strolled the grounds, looking out for Wes. I finally spotted him lurking beneath one of the trees that didn't have lanterns hanging in it.

"You look like you're on a stakeout," I teased.

"I kind of am. I'm keeping an eye out for anything that might be a problem."

"So am I blowing your cover by talking to you?"

"I'm not exactly hiding or undercover. I'm in uniform."

"Would you like some cocoa? I can bring you some. Or a cookie."

"I'm good, thanks."

"You're really working hard at not enjoying yourself. I never would have figured you to be a Scrooge."

"Scrooge was a miser who made others miserable. I'm merely refusing to be forced into mandatory fun. I don't think I'm stopping anyone else from having a good time. In fact, me working rather than playing is what's allowing everyone else to have fun here. I'm like the anti-Scrooge."

"Okay, then," I said. "Enjoy not having fun. I'm going to go revel in the holiday spirit."

Now I was really curious to learn if there was something sad in Wes's past that had brought about his attitude. Had something bad happened to him to give him a negative association with Christmas, or was it just about the extra work these events required?

Or, possibly, it had to do with the person who was the force behind them. Wes had somewhat reconciled with Jordan Randall, who'd been his best friend in high school before they had a falling-out, but he might still have had some residual bad feelings that made him resent Jordan's efforts. Maybe it wasn't Christmas he had a problem with, just the town's Christmas celebrations, and he didn't want to admit that his attitude was about Jordan.

Speaking of Jordan, I noticed him near the tree, checking on the device with the big, red button that would light the tree. A

small child bundled up in blankets sat nearby in a wheelchair. According to the press release, he was a local cancer patient who had won a hospital art contest. Part of the prize was getting to press the button that turned on the tree lights. That little detail automatically turned this into a human interest story. Jordan really had a knack for working every angle, but I felt like his heart was truly in it. This wasn't merely a business ploy for him. If anyone here was the anti-Scrooge, it was Jordan. I hadn't known him before he made his billions, but he struck me as being like the post-transformation Scrooge, wanting to spread joy with his wealth.

More people arrived, and the park was full, if not crowded, when it came time for the tree lighting. The mayor made a brief speech, then let the child start the countdown. When the kid pushed the button, the tall evergreen burst into light. These weren't the computer-synchronized lights of the downtown tree, but rather the old-fashioned big, multi-colored bulbs. At the moment of the lighting, the combined choirs burst into song. The combination of the kid, the lights, and the music gave me goosebumps. I wondered if Wes remained entirely unaffected or if this touched him in any way.

After the ceremony, I noticed that, for once, Jordan wasn't surrounded by people who needed his input for something, so I approached him. "Congratulations on a great event," I said.

"It's not really mine. I just helped with some of the organizing and funding."

"I hear you were the driving force behind all the holiday stuff."

"They had a good start already. I merely took it up a notch or two. We're positioned pretty well to become the Christmas capital of this part of the state. Marshall does a big deal in the northeast, and Grapevine has a lot of the focus in the DFW area. Then there's San Antonio farther south. We can own this part of central Texas. People want to experience a small-town Christmas, but they want it to be an idealized small town, not the true reality. I think a lot of

people watch those TV Christmas movies and want to see a town that does Christmas like that. We're giving it to them."

It was nice to know I wasn't the only movie addict. "Well, you're doing a great job, at least from what I know of those movies." I wasn't ready to admit that what I knew about them was watching at least one a night during the whole season. That would ruin my reputation as a hard-nosed newspaper reporter.

"We were supposed to have a snow machine for this, but it didn't get here in time. I may have it later this week. That was a last-minute idea. For next year, I want an outdoor skating rink. They have a plastic technology that functions like ice but that doesn't require all the refrigeration we'd need to maintain an outdoor rink in this climate. I think that would be a big downtown draw. Our opening night numbers looked good, and the pop-up shops are already on track to be profitable. We'll have to see what the sales tax revenues look like before I can convince the city council to go for adding more next year."

"I'd like to do a story on your planning for all this. I might even be able to get the wire services to pick it up. Do you have time to sit down for an interview tomorrow?"

"I'd love to! If we can get it on the wire, that might lead to more visitors."

I got out my phone and pulled up my calendar. "I'm pretty open tomorrow, so what's a good time for you?"

"Does nine work? I've got meetings all afternoon."

"That's great." I was putting in the info when I heard a commotion nearby. I looked up to see a brawl, right in front of the gazebo. A few boys, one of them wearing a letter jacket, were rolling around on the ground, kicking and punching.

I looked for Wes, and he was already sprinting over, as was another one of the cops on duty. The freelance photographer shooting for the newspaper got in close to take pictures. I wasn't sure I'd actually use them because I didn't want to mar the impression of the event, but in case it did turn out to be a story, I

was glad I'd have them.

There was a lot of yelling from within the scrum. I made out the words, "Raglan, you better take it back!" Raglan was the name of the guy Meg accused of the convenience store robberies, so that got my attention.

"Take what back?" another boy said as Wes pulled him out of the pile. "I didn't say anything!"

"Not to my face, since you're a coward!" another boy shouted. He was the one wearing a letter jacket, and he was built like a football player. He dwarfed the other cop, who pushed him bodily away from the fight.

"Okay, knock it off," Wes ordered. "You're ruining this event for the kids. If you want to fight, take it somewhere else. Keep it up here, and I'm hauling you in." To the guy in the letter jacket, he added, "And I think that would kill your chances of playing on Friday."

The football player straightened his jacket and said, "You keep your mouth shut, Raglan," before turning and walking away.

Cliff Raglan—if that's who he was—smoothed his hair and adjusted his clothes as he said, "Thanks, officer. I don't know what happened. He and his friends just started attacking me."

"And you didn't do anything to provoke it?" Wes asked, his voice loaded with skepticism.

"He's been spreading rumors about us," the other boy said. "He told people we were lovers, which we aren't. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but not everyone sees it the same way, and it was making the rest of the team get weird with us. We didn't know who started it, but now we do."

"Hey, now," Cliff said. "You don't know that. There's no proof who started that rumor. I'm not even on the football team."

"Yeah, you don't do much of anything but talk smack about people who actually do stuff. That and drive around in your Mercedes, looking cool."

"You're just jealous," Cliff said with a snort before turning and

walking away. I couldn't help but take an instant dislike to him. He was basically the snobby preppy kid from every teen movie. If he was the one robbing convenience stores for the thrill of it, I wanted desperately to bust him.

"Now, really, Lee," Wes said when Cliff was gone, "What brought this on?"

Lee handed him a folded piece of paper. "We knew there were rumors about Scott and me, but we didn't know where they came from, and then I found this note in my pocket today."

Wes studied the note, then said, "Can you be sure it's true?"

"You saw him. I'm pretty sure it's true. He's too smug about it, like he knows we can't prove it and he's getting away with it."

"Spreading rumors isn't a crime," Wes said, handing the note back. "Assault and battery is. If he'd pushed the point and wanted to press charges, I would have had to bring you in. Don't give him that much power over you. Keep it together."

"Yes, sir," Lee mumbled before walking away.

When he was gone, I approached Wes and said, "Don't you find it interesting that this Cliff kid gets accused of robbery, and now he's accused of starting rumors. Is he just that big of a jerk, or is someone out to get him? Or maybe both?"

"I don't know," Wes admitted. "He is a jerk. We get a number of complaints about him. He's the type who likes to stir things up but makes sure nothing can be pinned on him. Maybe he annoyed the wrong person, and they're getting back at him. But that's not really a police matter."

It wasn't a story, either. I got another cup of cocoa to restore my holiday mood and stood listening to the choirs and gazing at the tree and all the candles around the park until I was back in the spirit before I headed home for my nightly movie. I needed to find one about making the grump love Christmas so I could pick up some pointers.

Chapter Three

After interviewing Jordan the following morning and spending the rest of the day writing articles, I was eager to get outside for another evening of holiday cheer. There weren't any special events scheduled, but I still enjoyed window shopping, looking at the lights, and listening to the music. A lot more people were walking up and down Main Street than on a typical weeknight, when it was all but deserted, aside from Margarita's restaurant. I didn't know if these people were from out of town or just locals seeing the sights, but the downtown area looked like the way Jean had described it from back in her time, a busy place full of people.

I paused on a corner and lowered my psychic barriers that allowed me to go through life without being constantly aware of the ghosts all around me. Most of the time, I only saw ghosts who particularly wanted me to see them, but they were always there, and it could be unnerving to see them. Without my usual barriers, I saw people in old-fashioned clothes from a variety of eras moving up and down the sidewalks with their arms full of parcels. This really had been a busy town when going elsewhere was a major excursion. I smiled at the bustle from multiple generations before shutting it off again so that I only saw the living once more.

I stopped by Jordan's coffee shop to get a hot cocoa to take with me on my stroll, and it had the longest line I'd ever had to wait in there, which was a good sign that his bet might be paying off. Then again, it would take a lot of coffee to offset all the lights

and events he'd funded. The pop-up bakery next door sold Christmas cookies, and I stopped there to buy one. I knew they were baked elsewhere and brought in, but the shop still conjured up images of a grandmother baking cookies with the grandkids, rolling out the dough and cutting shapes. That store, too, was full of people, some buying cookies by the dozens. If Jordan was the one running all these pop-up shops, he might actually be profiting. The city was also likely getting a boost in sales tax revenue from the increased business at shops and restaurants.

In the park by the tracks, families watched the light show. I grinned at the sight of toddlers dancing along with the music and trying to chase the lights. I was tempted to join in and dance, but I did have a reputation to uphold. I wasn't sure what people would think about the town's newspaper editor dancing along with the toddlers. Besides, I didn't want to spill my cocoa.

As far as I could tell, people were having fun. They were out of their houses and mostly away from their screens, aside from those taking pictures to post online—something that was encouraged with social media-ready photo backdrops scattered around the park, complete with suggested hashtags for posting. Jordan had said that was an effort at viral marketing, getting people to spread the word by posting pictures of themselves. Groups of teens made the most of the backdrops, taking pictures of each other or clustering together for group selfies. If even jaded teenagers were getting into the spirit, I considered the efforts to be a big success. Unfortunately, Wes wasn't around for me to point out that people were enjoying all this. If he had a night off, I hoped he got some rest so maybe he'd be a bit less cranky.

Speaking of cranky, I heard voices raised nearby. I turned to see a shouting match between two women, one of them pushing a baby stroller. "How could you, Rachel? I thought you were my friend!" the woman with the stroller shouted.

"What do you mean?" Rachel asked, but the panic on her face suggested that she knew what the stroller woman meant.

“You slept with my husband! While I was helping my mother recover from surgery. I was gone five days, and you’d already moved in on him.”

Rachel took a step backward. “Now, Wendy, what gave you that idea?” Her protest didn’t sound very convincing to me.

“Let’s just say a little birdie told me. And don’t try to deny it. He confessed when I confronted him. He’s a rat and I’ll deal with him, but you were supposed to be my friend. When I talked to you about the problems we were having, it was because I needed a shoulder to cry on. I didn’t expect you to see it as an opportunity.” She moved forward, shoving the stroller ahead of her like she was planning to use it as a battering ram.

I worried that she was so angry that she’d forgotten about the baby in the stroller. The stroller was a big, sturdy one, the kind that a car seat snaps into, but I still didn’t think that being part of a battering ram would be good for a baby, so I stepped forward to block her path. “Hey, whoa, remember the little one,” I said. The baby didn’t actually look all that distressed. It was gazing wide-eyed at the blinking lights.

Wendy gasped and stopped abruptly, then glanced down at the baby. “I’m not the only one who needs to remember the little one,” she snapped at Rachel. “I just had a baby, and you slept with my husband!”

“He had needs. You weren’t meeting them.”

“I’d just had his baby! And then I was looking after my mother. For five days. And I don’t care what ‘needs’ he had, that didn’t mean you had to be the one to fill them. He couldn’t have slept with you if you hadn’t been willing. More than willing. He said you were the one who approached him. Did he lie about that?”

Instead of answering the question, Rachel said, “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Nobody should have known. If you didn’t know, no harm would have been done. Your husband was happier with the edge taken off and things were better for you when you got home, right? No harm done.”

“Well, someone did know. I found a nice little note from Santa on the mantel this morning, letting me know what my best friend and my husband had been up to while I was gone.” She made another lunge forward with the stroller, which I blocked.

“Baby, remember,” I said, but I couldn’t help but focus on the mysterious note left on the mantel. My interest in this conversation moved from pure morbid curiosity on the same level as watching a reality-TV meltdown to the tingle of a possible story. It sounded a lot like what had set off the fight among the boys the night before. I doubted there were any connections between the women and the boys, except for the note. There was a big difference between a note slipped into a pocket at school and a note left on a mantel overnight.

If I were a different sort of reporter writing for a different sort of publication, I could have run with the “Secret Santa” story. It was a bit too tabloid for me, as long as the notes were about personal failings rather than crimes, but I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on. Was someone in town who had access to other people’s secrets telling them, and if so, why?

Wendy wheeled the stroller around and stalked away, leaving Rachel muttering, “But who knew? I didn’t tell anyone.” She pulled a phone out of her pocket, jabbed the screen with her finger, then shouted into it, “Who did you tell? Your wife just accused me of sleeping with you—in the middle of the park. Everyone heard. I know I didn’t tell anyone. We were discreet. You must have told someone. Did you brag about banging me? Was that it?”

I trailed after Wendy, concerned about her state of mind and what that meant for the baby, but she didn’t get far before someone stopped her. “You said you found a note saying what your husband had done?”

“Yeah. It was left on my mantel, and it wasn’t my husband’s handwriting, so it wasn’t his way of trying to come clean without having to face me.”

“Okay, that’s weird, because the same thing happened to me.

Only, it wasn't about my husband. It was a warning that my boss was planning to fire me this morning—and they were right. The warning gave me enough time to get some files off my work laptop before I went to the office, so I have samples of my work and my résumé. I can't believe they did a round of layoffs during the holidays. I was the only person in my department let go, and my boss seemed to feel truly bad about it."

Now I was dying of curiosity, but I didn't feel like I could butt into this conversation. There was no good reason for me to intervene. I could only eavesdrop, and I did so with absolutely no guilt. If they were willing to shout their business in public, then I was willing to listen. I wouldn't actually run a story based on what I overheard without talking to them, but at this point I still didn't think I had a story. I was merely curious about what might be going on, and I wanted as many details as possible in case it became a story.

Was someone trying to ruin Christmas by creating strife? Wendy and her husband probably weren't going to get the baby's first Christmas they'd dreamed of after that bombshell, and their relationship would never be the same, even if they decided to stay together, but the woman who'd been fired had benefited from the tip. It had been bad news, but it had allowed her to brace herself and be prepared, so it might not have been as bad for her as it could have been if she'd been blindsided. It hadn't sounded like the football players at the park the night before had ever been friends with Cliff, so the note there hadn't destroyed a friendship. It had made Cliff a target, but it might also have healed some bad feelings on the football team if the players knew the source of the rumor was outside the team. There really wasn't a pattern to the incidents, aside from the notes revealing secrets.

The two women walked off together, talking, and I felt like the distraction of learning about another note had calmed Wendy down enough that I was no longer too worried about her. But I was curious about who this Secret Santa might be and what their

purpose was.

I probably had more access to people's secrets than anyone in town, since I got told everyone's business, but I knew less about personal stuff like this since I didn't know many people in town on a personal level. I just knew about shady business dealings, crimes, and that sort of thing. I only learned about affairs when they had something to do with a crime. I knew I wasn't sneaking into people's houses at night to leave notes with secrets on them.

That was another thing. How had the Secret Santa managed to sneak in to leave the notes? Slipping a note in a pocket in a crowded school hallway would be easy, but getting into a house during the night was more of a challenge. This was a small town, but it wasn't a place where people didn't lock their doors. Earlier in the year, there had been a couple of strings of robberies, so most people were on high alert. They locked their doors, and some had even installed security systems and cameras. It wouldn't be as easy as sneaking in through an unlocked kitchen door.

This was Stirling Mills, though, so rational explanations didn't necessarily apply. The various uncanny gifts many of the people had could be used for good or ill, and I'd already found more than a few cases of people taking advantage of their powers. There was the telekinetic who could unlock and lock doors, there were people who had a knack for going unnoticed, there were people who could influence other people to do things, there were people who could channel electricity and use it to bypass security systems, and there were people who could read minds.

Like Wes. He could "hear" vocalized thoughts, and that was one reason he didn't like crowds. He heard too much in his head. Now that I thought about it, that may have had something to do with why he didn't enjoy all these holiday events. He probably heard a lot that wasn't very festive or merry. But he had a hard time knowing whose thoughts he was hearing unless he was alone with a person because he couldn't distinguish among "voices" in his head. He might have picked up on someone thinking about having

an affair or spreading a rumor while he was working security at the holiday events, but he wouldn't have known where those thoughts came from, and he certainly wouldn't have broken into someone's house to leave a note. He was such a stickler about trespassing laws that he threatened to arrest me if I wanted to enter an unlocked door when I was pretty sure something was going on inside the house.

But it was likely that he had relatives in town who had the same power. I started to get out my phone to call him, but I stopped myself. The only crime here was the break-ins to leave the notes, and if the victims had reported that to the police, he'd know about it already and might have guessed at who the culprit was. If not, I doubted he was going to go out looking for someone who'd committed a crime that the victims didn't care enough about to report it to the police. Neither of these women seemed angry about the person who'd entered their homes during the night. They hadn't even sounded all that curious about how it had happened, like they actually thought Santa himself had made a quick pre-Christmas trip to tip them off about something he'd learned from the Naughty list. After living in Stirling Mills and discovering my own abilities, I was pretty open-minded about the supernatural, but I wasn't quite prepared to believe the Santa explanation. That didn't mean this was something to investigate, though. The only danger here was the risk to my perfect holiday vibe if someone was stirring up strife. At the moment, it wasn't worth sidetracking myself over.

I put my phone away, made another circuit of the downtown area to restore my holiday spirit after the disruption, then went home to watch another movie. I'd worry about this when—if—it created a bigger problem.

In the meantime, I wondered if maybe Wes would be less grumpy about Christmas if I could find something for us to do together that didn't involve crowds. Maybe he'd enjoy all the lights if he wasn't surrounded by people and having to hear their

thoughts. He had trouble hearing my thoughts unless I wanted to be heard, probably because of the way I'd learned to guard myself against having to see ghosts everywhere I went. The barriers I put up for that also worked to block his gift. A quiet evening looking at lights might be closer to his speed. I wondered if he'd be up for a late night when things were calmer downtown, or maybe we could take one of those carriage rides. All thoughts of Secret Santas dissipated, replaced by images of the two of us snuggled together in a carriage.

The next morning, when both Jean and my assistant Charlene were in the office, I brought up what had happened the night before. "Have either of you heard about anything like that happening in the past?"

"No, and it's not a story yet," Jean said. "We aren't going to start running rumors of affairs, and things like that."

"I wasn't planning to," I said. "I was just curious about what might be going on if someone's spreading secrets."

"I do know of someone else who got one of those notes," Charlene said. "It tipped them off about the neighbor who's been stealing their Dallas newspaper every morning."

"So that's at least three, plus the note put in the pocket of the high school kid," I said. "I know the kid targeted has been accused of doing other things but has gotten away with it so far, but I don't see a connection between the others, other than that someone knew something they felt like these people needed to know. The revelation about the husband's affair was probably painful and may wreck that family, but learning your neighbor is swiping your newspaper isn't on the same scale."

"It may be worse," Jean said. "If someone bothers to subscribe to the nearest big-city daily paper, they deserve to get it. If you want the paper, subscribe for yourself, or go to the store and buy a copy."

"But why would someone bother telling about it?" I asked. "Just out of fairness, or were they trying to turn the neighbors

against each other?”

“Maybe someone is just telling people things they think they need to know,” Charlene said. “The people causing any strife are the ones doing the things behind people’s backs. Don’t blame the messenger.”

“And don’t waste time on it, considering it’s not a story and you’ve got a paper to get to press today,” Jean said. “Get to work.”

“Aye, aye!” I said with a mock salute before returning my attention to checking the layout.

I was almost ready to send the paper to the proofreader for one final pass when the bells on the door jingled, and I looked up to see a woman entering the office. She glanced around nervously. “Um, hi. This is the newspaper office, right?”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “I’m the editor, Lexie Lincoln. How can I help you?”

“Well, I may have a story idea for you.”

I gestured toward the chair beside my desk. “Please, have a seat. We’ve wrapped up this week’s issue, but we’re always open to hearing ideas.”

She sat, clutching her purse on her lap. “I know this is going to sound utterly bizarre, and you won’t believe me, but I swear, I’m telling the truth.”

“Okay,” I said, giving her an encouraging nod. “What is it?”

“Well, I think I may have proof that Santa Claus exists.”

Chapter Four

That was not what I'd expected. Under other circumstances, I might have had to fight the urge to laugh, and I'd have assumed it was a joke, but I already knew someone was leaving notes in people's houses. This could easily be related. "Oh?" I said, trying to sound more sincere than skeptical. "Can you tell me what led you to believe that?"

"You're not laughing at me?" she asked, frowning.

"In this town? Let's just say I've heard stranger things."

"Make her get to the point, in case we have to hold the presses," Jean said.

"Please, tell me your story," I urged.

"Well, you see, my daughter Isabella got nominated for Christmas Queen. She's so excited. But she needs a formal gown for the ceremony Saturday, and I can't afford it. It just isn't in the budget. I'm not even sure I could afford one from the thrift store without making that her only present this Christmas. My hours got cut at work, and it's going to be tight unless things pick up or I can find another job. I hadn't told her yet. I hadn't told anyone at all. I was going to have to say something today because it's this weekend and she needed to know in time to pull out. But this morning, the perfect gown in just the right size was lying on the sofa in the living room, with a note saying, 'Merry Christmas.' It was signed 'Santa.'"

"That sounds more like a fairy godmother than Santa," I said.

“It was Santa who signed the note,” she said with a shrug.

“You’re sure no one knew you needed this?” I asked.

“I hadn’t said anything. I didn’t tell Isabella, didn’t tell any friends. I’ve been fretting over it. I prayed about it, but no one knew. I haven’t even told my daughter how tight money is, so I don’t see how anyone could have guessed when she got nominated that we couldn’t afford it. The only person who might have known about the money is my boss, and it would be an even bigger story than Santa being real if he gave us the dress.”

“Aren’t you a little concerned that someone was in your house overnight?”

“Why would I be afraid of Santa?” she said, laughing. “There wasn’t any damage, and nothing was missing—not that I have anything worth stealing. If someone wants to leave stuff for me, they’re perfectly welcome. My daughter’s a little disappointed not to get to go shopping, but the dress they left is exactly what she would have picked, and it fits her perfectly, so she doesn’t mind. I’m happy that she gets to participate. There’s even a small scholarship that comes with the crown if she wins, so that may help her be able to go to college.”

It was a nice feel-good story that was perfect for the season, whether or not it was proof of the existence of Santa Claus, so I took down her information. “You don’t mind telling this story in the newspaper?” I asked.

“You think I’ll sound crazy for believing in Santa?”

“And you’re letting people know your financial situation. Of course, that could lead to more gifts. People will want to help.”

She shook her head. “No, don’t use my name. I don’t want people thinking I want charity. The dress was a miracle. I don’t want anything else, and I don’t want my daughter to have the stigma.”

“Then I’m not sure what I can do with this. Even if I don’t use your name, people will be able to figure it out, since there are only a few queen candidates. Let me think about it, and we’ll see if

anyone else has a similar experience.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod. “If it was really Santa, or God, or an angel, I’m sure they know how grateful I am. If it was someone who somehow guessed my needs, I’d like to thank them, but I suppose if they’d wanted credit, they’d have signed their name. But I don’t want my daughter to have to deal with people knowing how she got her gown. I want her to be able to be like the other nominees. There’s been a lot I haven’t been able to do for her. I want her to have this.” She stood and added, “Thank you for listening. I needed to tell someone, though now that I think about it, blurting out a secret to the newspaper probably isn’t the best idea.”

I got up to walk her to the door. “Thank you for coming in. There might be a human interest story here, depending on what else happens, but I’ll have to think more about how to handle it, and it will have to wait for next week’s issue.”

When she was gone, I went back to my desk and sent the newspaper to the proofreader before saying to Jean and Charlene, “What do you think?”

“You’re right that it’s not a story without a name,” Jean said, “and even without a name, it would be way too easy to narrow down who it was just by saying what she was given and why she needed it. You don’t want to do that to that poor girl. Let her have her fancy dress.”

“I agree,” Charlene said. “But I can’t help but wonder if it’s the same person who’s been leaving the notes.”

“Yeah, we’re still dealing with secrets that no one could have known,” I mused as I swiveled back and forth in my desk chair. “Only this time they gave the person a thing rather than information. I’d love to get my hands on those notes to compare the handwriting.”

“You’d still have to be careful about using it in a story. Airing those secrets in the paper wouldn’t go over well,” Jean cautioned.

“This may be the first time you’ve told me not to run

something,” I said.

“Part of being a good editor is knowing what to leave out. You’ve got a human interest feature if the Secret Santa leaves more gifts, meeting people’s needs. Then you could lump the dress in and it might not be as obvious who it’s about. But if it’s just a dress and a bunch of secrets, it’s not really news and it could hurt good people. I’m willing to take down the creeps, but I don’t want to hurt innocent people just to have a story. You’ve got a week to figure out what to do about it and see if anything else happens.”

“You know, I think there was a mind reader in the sideshow,” Charlene said. “There are rumors of mind readers in town.” I kept my expression as blank as I could because I wasn’t sure if she knew about Wes, and I knew he didn’t want his gift to be widely known.

“There are also people who have gifts that might help with being able to break into a house,” I said. “But have you heard of people who have multiple gifts?”

“You can see ghosts and have uncanny luck.”

“I haven’t really done a study of gifts,” Jean said. “I don’t know of anyone I’m sure has more than one, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. We don’t know if they cancel each other out, if the kids only get one gift, or if they multiply if two people with gifts have children. I’m sure that’s happened in the past ninety years. It had probably already happened within the sideshow before they got here, since they tended to marry within the troupe.”

“I have a few sources who might have an idea of who could have been in a position to learn things,” I said. “I’ll check with them tonight after the paper goes to press.” I figured this had gone far enough for it to be worth talking to Wes. He was sure to have an idea of who his relatives were and to know if any of them might have been up to something.

People were already celebrating the weekend that evening, so when I went for my usual Thursday dinner at Margarita’s restaurant while the press ran beneath my living room, the place looked more like a typical Saturday night. I was fortunate to find a

single seat at the bar, but all the tables were full, and there were several groups waiting at the door for a table. I doubted I'd get a good chat with Margarita. She was helping wait tables and seat people. The usual menu had been replaced by a stripped-down special event menu with limited options that were probably easier to make ahead in large quantities. Fortunately, my favorite enchiladas were on that list, so it was no hardship. I gave my order to Josie, the waitress covering the bar, and swiveled my stool around to observe the dining room.

I didn't notice any strife, aside from a bit of belligerence from regulars who were aghast at having to wait for a table or who couldn't get their usual favorite table. There was too much noise to pick out any particular conversations to hear if anyone was talking about mysterious notes or gifts. I wondered if this was what a crowd was like inside Wes's head. If so, no wonder he was cranky about having to work around so many people. The combination of the physical noise and psychic noise probably made it even worse for him.

My dinner came out quickly, and I ate, then paid and left so I could clear out a spot. Margarita gave me a weary wave when I passed her on my way out. "We'll catch up later," she said. I nodded in response. Maybe we could have breakfast some morning, since she was so busy in the evenings.

Outside, the festivities were in full swing. There was just a hint of a chill in the air, enough to make it feel seasonal but still pleasant to be outside. I shoved my hands into my jacket pockets and headed down the sidewalk under the canopy of lights. The theater marquee announced the night's movie as *White Christmas*. It wasn't my favorite, but I thought it might be fun to watch it in a vintage theater. I checked my watch and saw that I had about an hour until showtime, so I kept going toward the park. No matter how many times I watched the light show, I still discovered new details each time, some particular light pattern that perfectly accented the music.

But that night, I found myself watching the people rather than the lights. I didn't see any major spats, didn't hear any raised voices. Maybe the Secret Santa had been too focused on the formal gown to drop off any notes the night before. I spotted Wes on the far side of the park, staying as far from the crowd as he could manage, and wandered over there. "Has your heart grown three sizes from seeing all the happy people yet?" I asked him.

"If I hear 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' one more time, I won't be responsible for my actions," he replied.

"Come on, there has to be something about this you enjoy. You don't like the lights at all? Or is it being around the crowds that makes you hate all of it?"

"I think the crowds have a lot to do with it," he said, sounding exhausted. "It's hard to get into the spirit when not everyone here is actually in the spirit, themselves."

"You should have a look at it all late at night, just before they shut it off, when there aren't so many people. I've been thinking about going out late one night to see it a different way."

He didn't pick up on my hint. "You aren't tired of living in the middle of all this yet?"

"Nope," I said, shaking my head. "I still like it." I moved closer to him so I could lower my voice. "Are you picking up on any particular bad vibes?"

"How do you mean?"

"Have you heard about the Secret Santa?"

"We're doing one at work. I got the chief, which is going to be fun."

"No, not like that. There's someone out there who knows people's secrets and has been leaving notes in the homes of people affected by those secrets."

"Like those kids the other night?"

"Yeah, but instead of the notes appearing in a pocket, people found notes on the mantel telling them things, like that their husband cheated, their neighbor was stealing their newspapers, or

they were about to get fired. And today, someone came to the newspaper to tell us that someone had left a gift she needed and had been thinking about but hadn't told anyone she needed."

"No one's reported a break-in," he said, frowning.

"You wouldn't know anything about how someone might know things people hadn't told anyone, would you?"

"I'm not doing it."

"But you could be related to someone who is."

"I'm not related to anyone who can get in and out of a locked house without anyone knowing."

"As far as you know."

"Say I do figure out who it is. What do you expect me to do about it? Like I said, no one's reported a crime. There's no reason to get involved."

"You aren't curious? Or worried it might escalate?"

"It sounds like the escalation was to give someone something they needed."

"Maybe. In that one case, yeah, but it also could have been meant to stir things up in the other ones. Telling the woman about her husband's affair meant it split up her friendship."

"With someone who wasn't a real friend."

"And telling the guys who started the rumor got a fight started."

"You've gotta admit, that kid probably had it coming."

"And the neighbors were turned against each other with the tip about the newspaper."

"Again, maybe it was better to know the truth, and I bet it stopped the stealing without anyone having to get arrested."

"I find it interesting that someone is trying to turn people against each other, just when we're having a big holiday celebration that's meant to make everyone feel all warm and fuzzy."

"Are you suggesting that someone is trying to sabotage Jordan?"

I hadn't considered that, but it was a possibility. "Gee, a mind reader with a grudge against Jordan. I wonder who the prime suspect might be."

"Jordan and I have patched things up. Even while we were on the outs, I wouldn't have wanted to sabotage him. I just didn't trust him."

"I'm sure there's someone else out there who wouldn't mind bringing him down. Or maybe they want to hurt the town."

"You're just mad that someone is ruining your perfect holiday."

"It's not affecting me, so far. I'm concerned about the community."

He gave me a wry smile and shook his head. "You want to do a story, don't you?"

"The good deeds would make a great human interest feature."

"If you out the Secret Santa, the good deeds might stop."

"So might all the stirring things up. If someone is breaking into houses, something bad could end up happening, even if they're doing a good deed. There are a lot of armed homeowners in this town, and they might not notice that someone's dropping off a gift or a friendly warning before they shoot."

"If they haven't taken that into consideration before they enter people's homes at night, then that would be their problem."

Stung, I said, "Well, I was just letting you know so you could keep an eye out in case it continues or in case someone reports it."

"Thank you for being a good citizen." I was still formulating a response to that when he abruptly jogged away from me, and I turned to see that a scuffle had broken out nearby. I followed to see what was going on.

A couple of teenage boys were grappling with each other, and Wes got in the middle to break them up. They stood on either side of him, breathing heavily but making no move to resume the brawl. "Okay, what's going on here?" Wes demanded.

"I thought you were my friend!" one of the boys shouted at the other.

"I am your friend!" the other one responded.

"Are you sure about that? I'm not just your good deed, someone you talk to out of pity?"

"What makes you say that?" the other one protested, and I thought I saw a trace of guilt cross his face.

The first boy waved a piece of paper. I moved closer to see what it was. It was a page from a memo pad, with a smiling cartoon Santa in the lower left corner. In uneven block capital letters, it read, "Kyle thinks he's too good to really be your friend. He's only being nice to you out of pity." The boy read it out loud.

"And who told you that? How would they know?" Kyle asked.

"Is it true?"

Kyle hesitated just a moment too long before saying, "Okay, maybe at first. I did feel bad for you when no one was talking to you, so I came over to sit with you. But then we really became friends."

"I was your project? Like your mission trip without having to leave home?"

"I was being nice!" Kyle shouted. "Isn't that what being a friend is? And how could this person possibly know what I was thinking? Why would they want to tell you something like that? They were trying to hurt you or me or maybe both of us."

"Or they wanted me to know who my real friends were—or weren't." The boy turned and strode away. Kyle started to go after him, but stopped, shaking his head. My heart went out to both of them. I'd been the new kid so many times in my life, and most of my friendships during my school years had begun with someone noticing me being alone and coming to join me or inviting me to join a group. I didn't know the motives of those people, just that they made me feel like less of an outcast. I'd also been the person to talk to the one on the outside. At the moment of the initial contact, it had definitely been out of pity, or maybe sympathy, but I didn't think I'd stuck with any friendship that ensued purely out of pity. I was pretty sure I'd had a few friendships in which I was

the pitied one. They tended not to last, though. After the initial moment of loneliness, I eventually found friends based on mutual interests and no longer needed the pity.

“Okay, that one was definitely about stirring things up,” I said to Wes when both boys were gone. “I don’t think that tip did anyone any favors. It just hurt both those guys.”

“It’s still not a crime.”

“No, it’s not. But that’s not a problem for me. I only have to worry about what’s interesting.”

I started to walk away, but he caught my arm and said, “Lex, please, stay out of this.”

At that moment, someone passing by said, “No wonder the paper is basically copaganda, when the editor is so cozy with the police.”

“Or at least one of them,” the other person said with a snicker.

That was what I’d been worried about, what Jean had cautioned me about. If people thought I was too cozy with the police to be objective, it would hurt my work. Before I could even begin to consider getting serious with Wes, I’d need to prove to the town that I could be objective where the police were concerned.

“I have to follow the story where it leads me,” I said, pulling my arm out of his grasp. I didn’t know if he’d noticed what that woman had said, but even if he hadn’t heard it, surely he’d “heard” it. He’d probably picked up on that sort of thing before, and maybe that’s why he hadn’t followed up on the idea of us after the things he’d said the weekend we’d been trapped together in a haunted house. It was funny how it hadn’t stopped him from expecting me to listen to what he said about what I should report.

I totally forgot I’d been planning to go to a movie, I was so determined as I walked home. I almost didn’t even notice the lights and the music. All I could think was that I was going to get to the bottom of the Secret Santa.

Chapter Five

I hadn't completely forgotten what season it was, so I put on a Christmas movie I'd seen before as a backdrop to my investigative work on the mystery of the Secret Santa. I made a cup of herbal tea, then settled down on the sofa with a stack of index cards. I made a card for each incident I knew about, listing the people who were involved, how they'd received the note, and any locations I knew about. When I looked at them, the only real commonality I could see was that they all involved secrets that supposedly no one else knew, but that the Secret Santa had somehow uncovered. I didn't know the names of everyone involved, just the first names I'd overheard, so I planned to search the news archives in the morning to see if I could track down any of these people.

As I studied my cards, I wondered how secret those secrets really were. Were some of them the sort of things an observant person might have figured out? For instance, Isabella's mother claimed no one knew about her money woes, but if finances were that tight for her, surely it would have been clear to anyone who was paying attention. Someone might have noticed the kind of clothes Isabella usually wore and knew where her mother worked and did the math to know that buying a formal gown would be a stretch. It could have been someone at school, possibly a teacher. Someone at school might also have known that Cliff was the one spreading rumors about the guys on the football team. It would be a challenge to spread a rumor without anyone at all knowing

where it started, so that one wasn't even a big secret. And someone at school might have guessed that a kid like Kyle wasn't likely to befriend someone like that other boy.

The other cases were outside the realm of the school, though, unless maybe the people involved were teachers or neighbors of someone connected to the school. A neighbor might have seen Rachel visiting Wendy's home while she was away, and a neighbor would have noticed the newspaper thief. That left the firing warning. It would have been entirely unconnected to the school, and a neighbor wouldn't have seen anything, but it was possible that the boss was related to someone at the school, either a student or a teacher.

The connection could have involved someone they all knew, like the same doctor or hairstylist. People blabbed things to their stylists and might not even think of that as having told anyone. It could be anyone people tended not to notice. Like, say, a waitress. People talked about all kinds of things at the table, not noticing the wait staff walking around them.

I sent a quick text to Margarita, suggesting we meet for breakfast at the diner the next morning. She would know if any of the people whose names I knew were regulars at her place.

Then there was the possibility I suspected, that it was someone who had the same gift as Wes for hearing thoughts. The fact that he wanted me to forget about the whole thing suggested to me that he might know who it was and didn't want it to get out. Of course, I couldn't write an article about a person using mind-reading powers to spill secrets, but at the rate things were going, people were going to be curious enough about the "Secret Santa" that I'd need to at least address it in the newspaper, even if I didn't tell who it was, how they got the information, or what secrets they were sharing.

One thing that made it a bit tricky if it was one of Wes's relatives was that his grandmother was president of the newspaper board, which made her the person who signed my paychecks (or

the direct deposit equivalent). I wondered if people took that into consideration when they thought I was cozy with the police department. Everything in this town was so intertwined that it was nearly impossible not to have a conflict of interest. It was hard to live in a small town without having any personal connections to people who might make news, and any editor who lived that way wouldn't be doing a good job of staying on top of the community. Jean might claim that she'd avoided the appearance of influence by remaining unmarried, but the fact that her father was a prominent businessman had possibly compromised her credibility as much as my dating Wes would. I wondered how much coverage she'd given her father's business. I'd have to go to the library's archives to look that up without her catching me doing it, though.

I realized that my movie had ended, and there was no music coming from outside. I'd stayed up later than I thought, and since Margarita had agreed to breakfast, I had to get up early the next morning. I made myself put my notecards aside and went to bed.

The diner was in one of the old railcars that used to belong to the sideshow. It had been expanded, but it was still like being in an old railroad dining car. After Margarita and I ordered, she vented for a while about how busy she was, with a full house from open to close. "On the other hand, I've already made my usual receipts for a whole month, so I guess I can't complain too much. I normally don't get the holiday surge that most retail gets. In fact, we tend to drop because people are going to parties instead of to restaurants, or they're trying to save calories where they can, and that means no Mexican food. At best, we do a bit of catering for parties. But all this Christmas stuff downtown seems to be working. It's more than made up for the slow Fridays during the playoffs. So, how's life in the outside world?"

I filled her in on the Secret Santa mystery. "Do any of these names ring a bell? When I was thinking about people who might hear secrets, waitresses came to mind."

"I know who Wendy and Rachel are. They used to be regulars,

but Wendy hasn't been around much since she had the baby. I don't think I've seen Rachel in awhile, either. I don't know any of the kids. I know Marisol, Isabella's mom, but she's not a regular. They don't eat out much. I don't think your Secret Santa is any of my staff." She leaned closer across the table and whispered, "You think it's a gift? A mind reader is sharing things they've heard?"

"The odds are pretty good, but it would still have to be someone in a position to pick up on thoughts, and probably not in crowds, since they'd have to be able to tell exactly who was thinking. So I guess restaurant was a dead end."

"Yeah, there's no way you'd get anything other than jumbled chatter in my place, especially lately. I would hope a therapist or doctor would have better ethics than to share what they hear—even if it was just a thought, not something actually said in a session."

"I wondered about a hair stylist. It would depend on the salon. In a busy one, you'd have the same problem as with a restaurant."

"There are a lot of single-stylist places here. We don't have that many big salons. Most people redo their garages or build a small building in the backyard and hang out their own shingle. So that is a possibility."

My hair was curly enough to be forgiving and long enough that I could reach the ends in back by flipping my hair over, so I trimmed it myself and hadn't explored the local stylists. "I wonder how I could figure out if everyone went to the same stylist," I mused out loud.

"I'm sure Wendy and Rachel get their hair done in the same place. They have the exact same chunky highlights. I'm not sure about Isabella or her mother. When Marisol said money was tight, she meant it. I can't see her going to get her hair done while she was worried about not being able to buy her daughter a dress."

"Good point. My other theory was that there was a school connection."

"That may be it!" she said, her eyes lighting up. "Wes has an

aunt who's a school secretary."

"Do you think she has the family trait?"

"If she doesn't, she's more observant than Sherlock Holmes. Nothing got past that woman when I was in school. Forget about trying to fake a note from your parents about needing to leave school early. I can't picture her breaking into people's houses to leave mystery notes, though."

"Maybe there's someone she tells things to, and then they take action."

"I'm pretty sure she used to let the principal in on things she learned, so that's possible." She frowned in thought, then said, "I don't know if she's still there, but there was another member of the office staff I could see being up for that, though she'd be more likely to loudly kick the door in, not sneak in, ninja-style. She was definitely the crusader type. No injustice went unanswered. She even urged the principal to give harsher punishments. If she knew things were going on that people needed to know about, she wouldn't want to sit back."

"So they're teaming up and in on it together?"

"Or maybe Zoe—the secretary—mentions things she's learned, and the other lady finally heard enough and decided she had to take action." Her eyes went a little unfocused, as though she was looking inside her own head. "What was her name? I don't even know what her official job title was. She was just the Scary Office Lady to us."

"Doesn't every school have a Scary Office Lady?" I said with a laugh.

The waitress brought our breakfasts, and after we paused to enjoy pancakes and French toast, Margarita asked, "What does Wes think about all this?"

"He's staying out of it until someone reports a crime. So far, there have only been a couple of minor public scuffles, and no one who's received a note or a gift has reported the break-in to the police. Otherwise, unless someone reports a break-in, he's not

involved.” I paused to take another bite, then took a sip of tea before adding as casually as I could, “And he wants me to stay out of it.”

“If it doesn’t involve a police investigation, it’s not really his say, is it?”

“Exactly!” I said, gesturing with my fork for emphasis. “I don’t plan to out anyone’s talent or spread gossip, but I think the idea of a ‘Santa’ who’s spreading secrets is of legitimate public interest. Maybe if our Santa sees the story and knows that the town knows what’s up, he—or she—will back off. If it were just good deeds, like the dress or the warning about the job, that would be one thing, but most of the notes seem to me to have been more about exposing people who are in the wrong, and some seem purely about stirring up discord.”

“I’ve got to admit, I’m not crazy about the idea of an information vigilante.” She gasped and added, “Oh, have you considered a hacker?”

“Not unless these people are sending e-mails with the secrets they claim they haven’t told anyone.”

“Good point. Hacking doesn’t do any good if they haven’t put the information on a computer, and I can’t imagine Rachel having a computer file about the affair she had with her best friend’s husband.”

“Maybe she kept a computerized diary as a way of getting it off her chest. ‘Dear Diary, you won’t believe what I did today. I can’t tell anyone but you.’”

We both laughed. When I stopped laughing, I said, “But would Marisol have written anywhere about not having money? She doesn’t strike me as the diary type. And who would keep a record of stealing their neighbor’s newspapers? ‘Saved another two dollars today! Go, me!’” I sighed. “If it is a hacker, I don’t stand a chance of finding that person. Let’s just hope it’s someone overhearing things, one way or another. It would be nice if they’d do more good deeds. The Secret Santa leaving gifts that are just what the

person needed is a better story than just the secrets and gossip.”

She shivered. “I’m glad I don’t have any secrets anyone would care about.”

I did. There was my relationship with Wes, whatever its status was, and my feelings about him, as well as my gift for seeing and hearing ghosts. Any of those things getting spread around could damage my credibility. I had to hope that if the Santa was a mind reader, they were as blocked from my thoughts as Wes was.

When I got back to the office, I checked my directory of the local school system and found a secretary named Zoe Duff. She had “M” as her middle initial, so I figured that was the one Margarita mentioned. Then I ran a search for the names “Wendy,” “Rachel,” “Lee,” and “Kyle” in the newspaper archives to see if I could get additional info on any of them. Lee was the easiest to find, since he was on the football team, and while the team was in the playoffs the paper was full of coverage.

The article on Senior Night included his parents’ names, so I was able to find his address. I got out my city map and marked the spot. I doubted he was the one who was overheard, since he was the one told the secret rather than the secret keeper, but I was looking for any possible connections.

There were plenty of stories about Cliff’s father in the newspaper, but nothing about him. He didn’t appear to participate in any school activities. When I looked him up in the previous year’s yearbook, the only photo was his individual picture in his class section. He wasn’t in band, on any team, or a member of any club. It was easy to find his address, since I knew his father’s name, and I marked that on the map. He lived in one of the newer developments on the outskirts of town, nowhere near Lee, who lived closer to the middle of town.

There were surprisingly few women in the newspaper named “Wendy,” and I quickly found the birth announcement from about four months ago. I could understand the Santa’s impulse to rat out her husband. There had to be a special place in hell reserved for a

man who'd cheat on a wife who'd recently given birth to his baby. I could understand the impulse behind an information vigilante—to use Margarita's term—who wanted to expose a jerk like that. I found their current address, and it wasn't too far from where Lee lived. Then again, in this town no one was that far from anyone else.

I found a lot more Rachels. One of them looked like a real possibility—and she worked at the high school. I pulled up the full article about October's Teacher of the Month, and I thought that might be her. The woman in the park had been wearing a hat, and I hadn't had a good look at her, but the picture looked like she could be the woman I'd seen. She had the chunky highlights Margarita had mentioned, and she was about the right age.

That meant that at least four of the secrets involved someone at the high school. There was Cliff and his rumor, Rachel and her affair, Isabella needing a dress, and Kyle and his friend. I called across the office to Charlene. "Do you know where the newspaper thief works or lives?"

"Are you planning a big exposé?"

"No. Right now, I'm more interested in who's sharing the secrets than I am in the secrets, and I have a theory about the connections."

"I'll have to check with my friend. I just heard it in a general sense. Why? You have a suspect?"

"I have a possibility. So far, they're all connecting through the high school. The only ones that don't are that one and the woman who got fired. I wish I knew who she was and where she worked. Maybe her boss has a kid in the school, and our Santa learned about the firing that way."

"The people in the school office see and hear all. I wouldn't be surprised if they've figured out everyone's skeletons. In fact, I'm surprised it's taken them this long to do anything about it. Something must have been the proverbial final straw."

"Or maybe they told someone who decided to take action. But

there's not a lot I can do if people don't officially tell me about these things. Maybe I'll do some person-on-the-street interviews to see what people have heard about the Secret Santa. That's an angle I could take."

"You'll have to wait until tomorrow night. Anyone in town tonight will probably be a tourist."

I frowned, not sure what she meant. Then after a moment it occurred to me. "Oh, right, the playoffs. Most of the town will be away at the game."

"I don't see how you could forget that," she said, shaking her head. "The newspaper has been full of it for weeks."

"But I haven't been writing those stories, and I've had other things on my mind, like solving a murder. And then all this Christmas stuff appeared. Football has been low on my priority list."

"It'll be interesting to see how many people are in town tonight. That'll be a good test for Jordan's scheme to bring in tourists."

"He was talking about running some targeted online ads."

"I hope he was targeting towns whose teams aren't in the playoffs. This is the last game before the state championship. Any town that's still in it won't be thinking about Christmas tonight."

I went back to my research. There were several Duffs in the city, and they were listed under the man's name, so I couldn't be sure which home was Zoe's, but they all lived in the middle of town, more or less in the same area as all the people I knew of who were connected to the Santa, aside from Cliff. If she was the information source for the Secret Santa, she might have picked up on some things at home as well as at work.

I looked up news reports on any publicly traded companies that had operations in town. That was about the only way to learn about layoffs. Other businesses wouldn't publicize the fact that they were letting people go, but Wall Street loved it when expenses were reduced. I didn't find anything that helped me make any connections and sighed in frustration.

I wanted to meet Zoe for myself and get a sense for who she was. While I was at it, I wanted to scope out the office for the crusading type Margarita had mentioned. Unfortunately, these days you couldn't just walk in to a school. And then I remembered it was a game day, and there would be a pep rally that the entire community was invited to. I *could* walk in to the school. I could get there early and interview school staff about the playoff run. I just had to hope that my ability to shut out mind readers worked as well with Zoe as it did with Wes.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Six

I'd been to a pep rally early in the playoff run, which meant that going to this one would double the number of pep rallies I'd attended in my life. We hadn't had things like that in the schools I'd gone to, which were mostly overseas, thanks to my father's military career. I'd been surprised to see that a pep rally was pretty much just like I'd expected from seeing teen movies. This one had escalated significantly. When I reached the school, a sign in the lobby at the entrance to the gym said that the rally would be held at the football stadium.

I headed to the office anyway, where a woman at the reception desk said without even looking up at me, "The pep rally will be at the stadium."

"Yes, I saw the sign. But I'm with the newspaper, and I wanted to interview some of the school staff about the team being in the playoffs."

The woman looked up at me then and raised an eyebrow. "We're not playing," she said. "It's all about the kids."

"I'm curious about the mood at the school, and I'm sure you see and hear all. You're at the heart of the school." I might have been laying it on a bit thick, but I'd learned long ago that the best way to get the people who usually felt invisible to open up was to make them feel seen and important.

She frowned at me for a moment, looking as though thinking was hard, then she gave her head a slight shake. "I'm not sure I

should be talking to a reporter without permission from the administration.”

“I’m not asking you to talk about school policy. But are people excited? Are you planning to go to the game? Has it been difficult for students to concentrate this week? We can check with the administration, if you like. Should you call them, or should I?”

The phone rang, and she held up a “one moment, please” finger as she picked it up. “Stirling Mills High School. How may I help you?” After a pause, she said, “Yes, the pep rally has been moved to the stadium to accommodate the crowd. It will happen on the same schedule. Thank you for calling.” She hung up, then said to me, “I can tell you that people seem to be interested. The phone’s been ringing off the hook, and I haven’t been able to get anything else done all day. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work I’d like to finish before the pep rally, since this is a short day.”

I got out my notebook and scribbled this down. “Can I get your name and title?”

“You can’t quote me on that! I didn’t say anything.”

She was a tough nut to crack, and I still didn’t know if she was my person of interest. “Okay, then, never mind,” I said, putting my notebook away. “Thank you for your time. I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

Usually, that led to the person apologizing and becoming more cooperative, since most people want to be helpful. I didn’t get to find out if it would have worked because a flood of students began swarming past. The bell hadn’t rung, and a lot of these students were wearing letter jackets or uniforms of some sort, so I figured these were the kids participating in the rally, getting out of class early to prepare.

“Donnie! Your jacket!” she called out to one kid.

The boy looked down at himself, blinking, then said, “Thanks, Mrs. Duff!” before running back the way he’d come.

It didn’t take a mind reader to figure out that someone was missing a jacket, but this little exchange had proved to me that this

woman was, in fact, the sees-all, knows-all secretary Margarita had mentioned, and that she was a pretty keen observer. She knew that this one kid, out of the dozens rushing past, should have had a jacket on and must have forgotten it when he left class.

That meant there was a good chance she could be the information source for the Secret Santa, whether or not she was the one actually leaving the notes. I'd need to find a way to confirm my guess and link her to the incidents I knew about. In the meantime, there wasn't much I could do now without arousing suspicion, so I went along with the kids through the lobby and out to the stadium. Some of the kids veered off toward the band hall, presumably to get their instruments.

The home stands were already filling up. It looked like most of the town had come to see off the team. Some of the kids who'd left the school went to the pep club section of the stands, while the cheerleaders went to the track to warm up, stretch, and run through their routines. Other kids taped signs to the fence between the stands and the track. There was almost as much activity going on as for an actual game.

Once the rally began, I scanned the stands for familiar faces, trying to see if any of the people I knew had been targeted by the Secret Santa were present and therefore connected to the school. I did spot Rachel and confirmed that the teacher in the newspaper archives was the woman who'd slept with her friend's husband. During the rally, the Christmas Queen candidates were introduced. I was happy for Isabella that she was able to participate. If the Secret Santa had done that, I had to hope that maybe some of the other things the Santa had done had been for a good reason, not just to make people angry.

I stayed at the end of the bleachers, away from the main crowd, so I could slip away after I'd been there long enough to be able to write an article and so it wouldn't look strange for me to have gone to the school. I noticed Zoe and some other women sitting on the front row not far from me, which meant I couldn't slip out too

early. I was sure she'd notice.

Also near me were a group of girls who were the crowd I'd probably have hung out with if I were a student at this school. None of them seemed to be trying too hard to fit in. One wore her reddish hair in a tight bun and had thick-rimmed glasses. That together with her loose clothes screamed, "Don't notice me!" Her friend appeared to be trying the opposite approach, with her hair dyed blue, and her outfit a combination of what had to be dress-code violations. At least, they would have been violations when I was in school. I wondered how she got away with it. The third girl in the group was somewhere in the middle, not trying to be flashy or invisible.

The three didn't talk to each other or interact. They mostly seemed to be sticking together so they wouldn't be alone. I'd definitely had friends like that, especially when I was new to a place and hung out with the people who'd let me hang out with them. It was enough to be allowed to sit with someone, even if they mostly ignored me. I usually eventually found friends I had more in common with. Someone would move away, leaving her friends with a gap in a group, or someone new would move in and fall in with me. And if I didn't find anyone, I'd move soon and would get to start over. I couldn't imagine being an outsider in a school where not a lot of new people moved in and I couldn't look forward to leaving within the next year.

That group slipped out even before I did, during the band's performance, when the stadium echoed with sound. I guessed they wouldn't be going to the game that night. I waited until the principal had made his remarks before I made my own escape. On my way to the parking lot, I passed Cliff and a couple of other guys standing just inside the stadium gate. The bit of conversation I overheard as I walked by them gave me the impression that they were mocking those who were in the various groups involved in the rally. I imagined it was insecurity on his part that had led to him starting rumors about football players. If his father had only

begun making money in the past few years, he might have missed out on the opportunity to get started in any activities. He'd have needed an instrument when he was in sixth grade to be in the band now, and it would have been difficult to make it on the football team in high school if he'd never played pee-wee football.

When I was back downtown, I went for an early dinner at Margarita's, before the lights came on and, I hoped, before the place got too crowded. The game was far enough away that I doubted too many people would be going out to eat before heading out. "It's the calm before the storm," Margarita said when I arrived. "Actually, we'll get a real test for how many people the Christmas festivities draw while all the locals are out of town."

"It looks like a normal Friday night," I said after glancing around.

"Yeah, even though about half the town is gone. That bodes well for my receipts. Maybe not so well for my feet. I swear, after I close on Christmas Eve, I'm going to crawl into a bathtub and not come out until the water's cold."

"Aren't you closed on Mondays?"

"I do the bathtub thing Sunday nights, too. But it will be even better knowing I don't have to face it again for a couple of days."

"I thought the lights were staying up until the new year."

She closed her eyes and groaned. "Okay, then, New Year's Eve I'll be celebrating. Oh, wait, Jordan's having a party. I may close for the first week of January to let my staff recover. And me."

By the time I was through with my meal, a crowd had already formed just inside the door, with people waiting for seats. I waved good-bye to Margarita and headed out. The lights came on just as I stepped outside, and I still found that magical. I couldn't imagine getting tired of it. I'd even miss it when it was all over. The downtown area would be so dull and drab when it went back to normal. I wondered if I could talk Jordan into leaving a few strands of white lights up year-round.

Speaking of Jordan, I saw him down the block, standing

between two women in wheelchairs. One was Ruthie, but I didn't know the other woman. I guessed she was Jordan's younger sister. When the way was clear, I ran across the street to greet them. "It looks like you've actually got tourists," I said to Jordan.

"Yeah, looks good," he said. "Lexie, have you met my sister, Lisa?"

"No, but I feel like I have," I said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Likewise," she said with a shy smile. I knew she didn't like crowds, so I wondered if she'd come out to see the lights tonight in hopes that it wouldn't be as crowded as usual.

"I was worried about tonight," Jordan admitted. "I'd have hated for the first Friday night to be a bust, but we planned this a year in advance, and we had no idea that the football team would still be in the playoffs. But if there are people here, that means we have actual tourists."

"And since we have tourists, I'd better get into the studio," Ruthie said. "I sold a lot of art last weekend, and if there are people from out of town, I might do even better this weekend, unless they want that postcard-type stuff and that's why they come to see the small-town Christmas."

"Need a hand?" Jordan offered.

"Nah, I've got it, though we really need to upgrade the sidewalks."

"Tell me about it," Lisa said. Ruthie laughed as she wheeled away.

"We'll have to see what the sales tax revenues are like from all this, and then I might be able to sway the city council," Jordan said. "What I'd love is to change the parking from nose-in to parallel and widen the sidewalks, so people can walk more easily."

"I don't think we really need all that now," Lisa said. "It's maybe a month out of the year when we have this many people here."

"Ah, but I have plans for other events throughout the year."

"He never switches it off, does he?" I said to Lisa.

“Never.”

“I’ve been thinking that for next year we might try turning downtown into a pedestrian-only zone, like in European cities,” he said. “The trick there is that this is the business route of a state highway, so it might be difficult to get permission.”

“If people are walking in the middle of the street, they’re not window shopping, which means they’re not shopping,” I said.

“Oh, good point. This is all about the shopping.”

“Is there any chance any of these bakeries might become permanent and not just pop-ups? I don’t necessarily want gingerbread year-round, but it might be nice to get a loaf of French bread and an éclair without having to drive anywhere.”

“I’m trying to persuade some people to do something like that down here, but at the moment, we don’t really have the foot traffic to support that. Once all the apartments are open, that’ll help. I’ve been getting a lot of interest from the model unit we’ve got open for tours.”

“Enough about business!” Lisa said. “Can’t you just look at the pretty lights without seeing dollar signs?”

“Sorry, sis. I just want all this to go well. I want this town to be everything it could be.”

To me, she said, “You’re the newspaper editor, so you might know about this. Have you heard anything about this Secret Santa?”

“Yeah, I’ve been looking into it,” I said. “Why? What have you heard?”

“There’s a kid in my accident recovery support group who desperately wanted a new video game. He hadn’t even told his parents that’s what he wanted because he knew they couldn’t afford it. And he found it in his living room this morning, like some Santa had left it there overnight. There’s no way anyone could have known he wanted it.”

“Unless they knew something about kids and knew all kids wanted it,” Jordan said. “But I hear that this isn’t the only case.”

“I know of one other person who got a surprise gift,” I said. “But not everyone’s been getting presents. The ‘secret’ part has a double meaning.” I told them about the incidents I’d heard about already.

“Any theories about who it might be?” Jordan asked.

“My guess is it’s someone connected to the school. How old was this kid in your group?”

“He’s a freshman,” Lisa said.

“Which supports my theory. Someone at the school might have guessed at what he’d want and knew he’d need it. Maybe someone in the office staff who knows who gets free or reduced price lunches.”

“There was this lady in the office when I was in school who seemed to know everything,” Jordan said. “You couldn’t get away with anything. I think she’s related to Wes. Not that this meant he got any slack. She busted him, too. But I can’t imagine her sneaking into people’s houses during the night.”

“I’m thinking of doing a feature on it for the next issue,” I said. “I won’t share any rumors, but if people are talking about it, I need to cover it. Can you put me in touch with this kid for an interview?”

“I’ll see if he wants to talk. He’s pretty excited about it right now,” Lisa said. “Now, I want to check out the lights. Want to join us, Lexie?”

“Sure,” I said.

She wheeled her electric chair around, and we made our way down Main Street, with Jordan pointing out details of the decorations, including some I hadn’t noticed. We stopped at one of the pop-up bakeries for treats—and for Jordan to check on how sales were going. I found myself humming along with the music, and when I anticipated the next song before it began, I realized the music was on a loop. I’d been hearing the same combination of songs in the same order every night for a week. “Is there any chance you could mix up the music?” I asked Jordan.

“Well, the show in the park is synchronized to it,” he said, “So we’d have to reprogram those lights. I think there’s a way to tie the show to the particular song, so that whenever that song plays, it would run that part of the show, but that’s a trickier bit of programming that would take time to work out. Or I could isolate the music in the park from the music downtown, with a buffer zone so they don’t interfere with each other. Maybe next year. It’s not bothering you, is it? I imagine you hear more of it than most people do, living and working on Main Street.”

“No, it’s not bothering me,” I said. “It’s just like listening to the same album every night. Which I’d probably be doing if I wasn’t listening to the music from outside. And it’s good music—the classics instead of the really annoying stuff.”

“I figured we were safest with music that’s already stood the test of time and not the things that might go out of style before the end of the season,” he said.

It occurred to me that someone whose mind ran on a business track and who was plugged in to the business community might know what businesses were cutting back, so I asked him, “Do you know who might have been trimming staff lately? One of the Secret Santa cases I haven’t been able to connect is the one with the woman who was warned that she was being let go. I just overheard her, so I have no idea who she is or where she worked.”

“There are a few companies that might have cut back, which is a terrible thing to do around the holidays. I’ll check. And if I can figure out who she is, I’ve probably got a job for her, depending on what her skills are.”

“I know someone else who might need at least a part-time job, or maybe a better full-time job,” I said, thinking of Marisol, Isabella’s mother. I made a mental note to send him her contact information.

We reached the park, which looked perfectly Christmassy. I could almost imagine snow falling to complete the scene, dancing flakes glistening in the lights. No, I realized after blinking a few

times, there was snow falling. It wasn't my imagination. But it was way too warm for that, wasn't it? "Is that snow?" I asked.

"The snow machine came in," Jordan said. "It's not real snow, though. It's a foam, so it only looks pretty falling, then dissolves when it hits the ground. There's a different kind of snow that goes on the ground, and it's on order."

I did feel somewhat like I was out in a gently falling snow as the white flakes swirled around me, but when I reached out a hand to catch it, it disappeared without the kiss of cold I recalled from snow. The kids didn't seem to mind. They ran around, chasing snowflakes. "This does give the falling snow ambience without the cold or the traffic hassles," I said.

"But it's not quite right yet," Jordan said with a sigh.

I stayed out just enough longer to get a sense of the number of people who had come downtown before heading home. I wasn't exactly tired of the displays, but I'd seen them enough that they were no longer quite as thrilling. I was more in the mood for some popcorn and a movie on my couch.

I entered through the newspaper office, locked the front door and set the alarm, then headed to the press room to reach the stairs to my apartment. As soon as I opened the door to the press room, Jean flew at me. "You've gotta hear this!" she said.

Chapter Seven

It looked like my movie would have to wait. If I didn't appease the annoying ghost, she'd interrupt my movie. I followed her to the scanner and heard a conversation in progress. It sounded like the police were debating what to do about something. I recognized Wes's voice. "What's going on?" I asked Jean.

"A whole string of robberies, hitting businesses on the highway. The guy's hit a gas station shop and two fast food places, so far."

The dispatcher's voice came over the scanner, reporting, "You're not gonna believe this, but there's just been another one." She sounded like someone's mother sharing gossip over a cup of coffee.

"Are you sure it's a new one and not just someone else reporting the same one?" Wes's voice said.

"It's at the Stop-N-Snack. I don't think we've had that one yet."

"Is he still there?"

"No. It's like the others. He waved a gun, demanded a candy bar, and left."

Another voice said, "I hope this guy isn't diabetic. All those candy bars on top of the pies and shakes from the fast food joints would do him in. Should I head over there?"

"Yeah," Wes said, sounding weary. "But no rush. Get a statement and see if they have video. Maybe he'll have slipped up this time and we'll get something that'll ID him."

I turned to Jean. "A sugar rush crime spree?"

“Wild, isn’t it? What kind of idiot would risk getting put away for aggravated robbery just to get some snacks?”

“One who’s sure he won’t get caught,” I guessed. “It doesn’t sound like he’s doing this because of anything he needs. He’s just doing it to prove that he can, maybe for the thrill of it, maybe for the power it gives him over his victims.” If the girl who’d called me was right about who it was, then I wondered if it was a weird form of bullying. Were the people on duty at those places classmates he was terrorizing? “It’s odd enough, and there are enough of them that I think we’ve got a trend story, even if they haven’t caught a suspect.”

“You should go out there and interview people tonight, while those same clerks are on duty.”

The same thought had occurred to me. There might be entirely different people at those places if I waited until the next day. “Who got hit, aside from the Stop-N-Snack?”

She listed most of the fast-food places and convenience stores on the highway around the point where the business spur rejoined the bypass around the main part of town. I headed for the garage, pulled out into the alley, and then found myself stuck. There was a line of cars on the side street, waiting to cross or turn on to Main Street. After waiting for several minutes without a break, I backed up, turned around, and went to the other end of the alley, where the cross street was one-way in the opposite direction. From there, I took back streets until I was beyond the downtown area, got on Main Street, and headed out of town to the main highway and drove around the bypass until I reached the target area. The whole ordeal took me at least half an hour longer than it usually would have, thanks to the downtown traffic. Fortunately, the rest of the town was quiet.

In fact, most of the businesses on the highway were deserted. I thought at first that they’d closed after the robberies, but the lights were on inside. I started with one of the fast-food places. The door was unlocked, and I entered to find a teenager halfheartedly

wiping the front counter. She perked up when she saw me. “Hi, I’m with the newspaper,” I said. “I understand you were robbed tonight. Would you be up for talking about it?”

Her shoulders sagged when she realized I wasn’t a customer, then she frowned. “I’m not sure I’m allowed to talk to reporters.”

“I don’t have to use your name. I may just do a roundup of all the places that got hit tonight.”

“All the places?”

“He seems to have gone down this whole row.”

“Wow. Weird.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m writing an article,” I said. “Just tell me what happened here.” I didn’t get out my notebook because I wasn’t planning to quote her directly, and I figured she’d be more likely to open up if she wasn’t conscious of me writing down what she said.

“Well . . .” she hedged, then she apparently made a decision because she took a deep breath and said, “This guy in a ski mask came in, pointed a gun at me, and demanded a chocolate milkshake. But our milkshake machine isn’t working. It needs to be fixed, but they can’t get the parts. I told him that, and then he demanded a pie. I warned him that it was pretty old. We haven’t made a new batch, since there aren’t many customers. It’s been sitting under the heat lamp for ages. He said he’d take two of the old ones. I gave them to him, and he ran off.”

“Did you recognize him? Was there anything about him that seemed familiar?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. He sounded like he was doing a funny voice so I wouldn’t be able to identify him. It was like when a famous actor does a voice in a cartoon, and you feel like you should know him because he sounds kind of familiar, but he’s doing something different for the character and you don’t recognize his voice.”

“So he sounded like he might be familiar, but you couldn’t place him?” I ventured.

“Yeah. Like in the movie when you see the credits and you go, ‘Oh, of course, him,’ but you couldn’t place him before that.”

“Was there anything about the way he looked?”

“He was wearing pretty ordinary clothes, nothing that stood out. Jeans and a jacket. I don’t think I’ve seen the jacket before. He had on a ski mask and gloves. I’m pretty sure the gun was fake. It didn’t have the orange tip thingy, but the way he moved it, it seemed like it was too light for it to be a real gun. I didn’t want to take any chances, though. I’m not gonna die over a couple of pies.” She gnawed her lower lip, then said, “Can I get your number? If I get fired because I gave him the pies, I want to make a big stink about it. There should be an article about the way the company treated me.”

I agreed and gave her my business card. “Let me know if you think of anything else or if you get in trouble for handing over the pies.”

The story was similar at the next place, except the shake machine had worked there. “That’s why people come here instead of that other place,” the clerk said proudly as he straightened his paper hat with the company logo on it.

“Was there anything unusual about the robber? Anything you recognized?” I asked.

“No, not really,” he said with a shrug.

“What about his voice?” I prompted, hoping that didn’t count as a leading question.

“It was funny, like something in a cartoon. At least, I don’t think anyone really talks that way in real life.”

“Did you notice anything about the gun?”

“I didn’t look at it too much.” He shuddered. “It freaked me out. I focused on getting him his shake and tried not to think about the gun. I did spit in his shake while my back was to him, though,” he added with a grin. “Maybe it was risky, but I couldn’t resist.” He winced and added, “But don’t put that in the newspaper. I don’t want him coming back to get his revenge, and I don’t want to get

fired. The company probably still considers him a customer.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” I assured him.

At the first convenience store, the robber had grabbed a candy bar from the display by the register, then pointed his gun at the clerk and announced that he was going to take it and she couldn’t stop him. “I only called the police because the manual says we have to, and I’d’ve been accused of taking it myself if I hadn’t,” the young clerk told me. “It seems like a lot of effort for a candy bar. I wonder if it’s some kind of hazing thing, like he’s doing it on a dare. I mean, if you’re going to take the risk to rob the place, at least take two candy bars, you know?”

“Did you see his car?”

“I don’t think he parked here. He ran around the corner afterward. We have cameras on the gas pumps, and I bet he was avoiding them.”

At the next convenience store, I recognized the clerk as one of the girls I’d noticed at the pep rally, the one who wore thick glasses and her hair in a tight bun. When I introduced myself, she sighed and said, “I’ve already told you who it is.”

“Oh, you’re Meg?”

“Yeah. And I told the cops who it is. But nobody believes me.”

“Was there something you recognized about him?”

“I just know, okay? I’ve known him since we were kids. I see him at school every day. It’s not any one thing. It’s just, like, him.”

I recalled that she hadn’t been able to pick the robber who’d held her up out of a video lineup the last time, so it seemed she didn’t know, but I didn’t want to argue with her. I wasn’t sure she was wrong, but I couldn’t print Cliff’s name in the paper without a lot more evidence. “Can you tell me what happened?” I asked instead.

She sighed again and recited in a monotone, “Guy in a ski mask comes in, grabs a candy bar from the display, points a gun at me and says he’s taking it and I can’t stop him. But just before he gets to the door, he stops and demands that I give him a pack of

condoms. We keep them behind the counter because people are always swiping them.” She rolled her eyes. “I think he thought he’d embarrass me. But he didn’t say what kind he wanted, so I gave him the smallest ones we have. I wouldn’t have called the cops, since they don’t listen to me, anyway, but I have to or I’ll get in trouble.”

“Why do you think he’s doing this? If you’re right about who he is, he doesn’t need to steal candy bars. He can afford to buy them.”

“He’s doing it because he can. And I think he’s on a power trip, scaring and humiliating people who actually have to work. He gets a sick thrill out of waving a toy gun at us and making us do what he wants.”

“You’re sure it’s a toy gun?”

“It looks real, but I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t take the risk of using a real one. This way, if he gets caught he can claim it was just a prank and there’s a chance his dad’s lawyers can get him off. It’s more serious if he uses a real gun. I don’t think he has the nerve for that.”

The police were still at the last store I visited. Officer Gutierrez was taking a statement from a visibly shaken clerk, a boy in his teens. He was trying to hold it together, but his voice quavered and he was pale. I hung back, not wanting to interfere, but remained within earshot. “And then he put the gun right between my eyes. I was pretty sure it wasn’t a real gun, but he looked at me like he wanted it to be. He squeezed the trigger slightly, not enough to shoot, but enough to make me nervous.”

“So you got a close-up look at his eyes?” the officer said.

“They were blue. That’s all I can tell you.” I wondered what color Cliff’s eyes were.

“Then what happened?”

“He said he was going to take those candy bars, and if I hit the alarm button, he’d kill me. I didn’t think the candy bars were worth the risk of me being wrong about it being a real gun, so I did what he said. He pressed the gun into my head again, and then he

ran off. After he was gone, I called the police.”

“Was there anything you recognized about him?”

“He seemed familiar, but I couldn’t tell you why, and I don’t know who he reminded me of. But I feel like I’ve seen him before. His voice was weird, though, like a cartoon character, or something like that.”

The officer made a note, then he looked up and noticed me. “Hey, Lexie,” he said. “Wes isn’t here.”

Did he think I’d come because I was stalking Wes and thought he’d be here? “I know. I was just coming to the scene of the crime. Well, scenes of the crimes. There seem to have been a lot.”

“Wes can give you an official statement next week.”

“No one was hurt?”

He frowned, then said, “I can tell you that much. No. And not much was taken. But you’ll need to get the official statement from Wes. I’m not supposed to talk to reporters.” I wondered if that rule was unique to me or regular department policy.

“Would you like to give a statement to the newspaper?” I asked the clerk.

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think I’m supposed to. You’re supposed to call the owner.”

“The owner wasn’t the one who had a gun pressed against his head.”

“I don’t really want to talk about that, and I don’t want my name in the paper, in case the guy decides to come back to get me for talking about it.”

“Fair enough,” I said. I could see his point, though I suspected the robber already knew who he was, especially if Meg was right about the culprit.

I left with the officer. “This is a weird crime spree, huh?” I said.

“Yeah, it’s weird. I don’t know what the guy’s deal is. He’s risking a lot for some snacks.”

“The risk may be the point.”

“That’s what Wes said.” He grinned. “I guess you two are on the

same wavelength. That may be why you're a good couple."

"What?" My surprise was only partially feigned.

"You mean you're not an item? You were together at Jesse's house that night for dinner, and I thought maybe . . ."

"Oh, no, that was work. Jesse was going to tell us about the bridge scheme, and I needed a cop in case there was evidence of a crime." I realized I might be protesting a bit too much, but I couldn't go back in time and dial it down. But I also didn't want the police department thinking we were a couple when we really weren't.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have assumed."

"It's cool. We are friends." And then I worried he'd mention this to Wes, and I felt like I was back in junior high, when I wanted to know what a guy I liked thought about me but lived in terror of the guy knowing I liked him. I didn't want Wes to think I didn't like him, but I also didn't want him thinking I thought we were a couple when we weren't.

I had plenty of time to ponder the crimes and my relationship dilemma as I drove back home. The traffic near downtown was still terrible. It seemed a lot of people were driving down Main Street to look at the lights instead of parking and walking. Even getting off Main Street and taking the side streets didn't help much, since the side streets got backed up as they approached Main Street. The stop-and-go traffic reminded me of rush hour in Dallas.

I'd noticed that all the clerks were teens, so if the robber was doing it as a prank or a form of bullying, chances were good that he was also a teen, even if he wasn't Cliff. I wondered if there was any other link among the clerks other than that they weren't involved in school activities that would have them at the game. Was it personal, or was he just hitting places where he thought the people on duty wouldn't be armed? He hadn't hit the gas station store closer to town, where the owner was known to keep a shotgun under the counter. The robber seemed likely to be a teen who wasn't on the football team or in the band, and I guessed he

had enough privilege that he thought he could get away with it or his parents could get him out of trouble. I was pretty sure that would narrow things down considerably. Most of the wealthier kids in town seemed to participate in a lot of activities, or they went to the games because they were able to get tickets.

And then there was the worry about what the rest of the police department thought about Wes and me. If Hector Gutierrez had said anything about Wes and me being together, then maybe they all already assumed we were an item. Did they consider that a good thing, or were they suspicious of how I might affect Wes's work?

After nearly twenty minutes of inching forward down the final couple of blocks, I finally reached the alley and could get into my garage. I wondered if Jordan's idea to make downtown pedestrian-only would help or hurt the traffic situation. I just hoped I didn't need to go out at night again before Christmas.

Jean met me when I reached my apartment. "So, what'd you get?" she demanded.

"It sounds like it's a warped teen prank. At least two of the clerks were pretty sure he used a toy gun. He took only small items. One clerk wondered if it was a hazing thing. I'll do a story, but there's not much to go on. I'll get more info from the police Monday. But for now, it's the weekend." She took the hint and vanished.

It was too late to start watching a movie, and I wasn't really in the mood. I headed straight to bed, but the lights from outside made my bedroom almost as bright as during the daytime, and the Christmas music was distracting enough to keep me from sleep. I glanced at the clock and saw that I had more than an hour to go, since the lights and music ran later on weekends. I finally grabbed my pillow and a blanket, went to the living room, closed the bedroom door to shut out the festivities, and lay down on the sofa. I loved all the holiday spectacle when I was out in the street, but it would have been nice to be able to shut it off when I was at home.

I only had a few more weekends of this to go, I reminded myself.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eight

The Christmas Queen was being chosen and crowned Saturday night, so I had to cover the event instead of just ambling and soaking up the holiday ambience. When I arrived at the park around sunset, I spotted Wes and made my way over to him. “I hear things got busy last night,” I said.

“You heard about that?”

“I’ve got a scanner, and that many calls caught Jean’s attention.”

He shook his head, as though in disbelief. “That was the weirdest thing—well, it’s this town, so maybe not quite the weirdest thing ever. But it is one of the strangest crime waves we’ve ever had. The damage was so minor, but the sheer number of crimes concerns me.”

“I talked to the victims. Most of them think the guy was using a toy gun.”

“That’s what it looks like in the security footage I’ve seen, but I wouldn’t bet my life on it. It could be a three-d printed plastic ghost gun. Don’t quote me on that.”

“I’m not even planning to print that it might not be a real gun. I wouldn’t want him to escalate if he thinks people have figured him out.”

“But you are going to print something?”

“I think at this point it’s widespread enough that I have to. People are sure to be talking about it, so it’s probably better to get

the facts out there than to let rumors circulate.”

“I’m not sure if that will encourage him or if it will give him the attention he wants and he’ll stop.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t make him sound cool.”

“So, you actually went over to the scene of the crime last night? You left all this?” He gestured to indicate the general downtown area and the holiday decorations.

“Duty called.”

“You’re not tired of it yet?”

“Well, driving last night was kind of a pain,” I admitted. “And I did end up sleeping on the sofa for part of the night so I could shut out the lights and music. But I still love it when I’m out here. It hasn’t grown on you? You’ve never had a night when it was late and the lights were still on but the crowds had thinned out, and you looked around and had to admit that it was kind of magical?”

“Nope.”

“Funny, I could have sworn you had a soul.”

“There are other things I like. Talk to me about the forest when the wind rustles the leaves and it sounds like the trees are whispering to you, or the early morning when the mist is rising in low spots, but then the sun comes out and the world reappears. That’s real magic.”

Okay, he had a point, and his words had made me feel a little swoony, I had to admit. I hadn’t realized he was quite that poetic. “So, what would be Christmassy to you? Walking in the woods to cut down a tree? A quiet starlit evening when it’s crisp and cold? A candle in a window making a home look warm and welcoming?”

He shrugged. “I’ve just never been big on Christmas.”

“What happened, did your dog die on Christmas, or something?” With a jolt of horror, I hurried to say, “Your dog didn’t die on Christmas, did it? Or anyone else? Because I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

With the slightest of smiles, he shook his head and said, “No. It’s just not my thing.”

I was eager to pursue the topic, but the lights came on, and soon there was a fanfare from a pair of trumpeters stationed at the gazebo. That was my cue to get to work because it meant the selection of the Christmas Queen was about to begin.

The candidates arrived at the park in a horse-drawn carriage. I imagined they had to feel like Cinderella arriving at the ball. The trumpeters played another fanfare, and a footman stepped forward to help a dark-haired girl wearing a stunning red velvet gown exit the carriage. The emcee introduced her as Isabella Vasquez. Whoever her fairy godmother or Secret Santa was, they had to have been keenly observant, if not magical, because that dress fit her like it had been made for her. If I hadn't heard her story, I never would have suspected it had been left by a mysterious benefactor.

As Isabella made her way to the gazebo, the emcee read out a list of her community activities and accomplishments. She was a top student, on the student council, and involved in a number of charitable organizations. She helped elementary students with reading, volunteered at a food bank, and was part of a "Keep Stirling Mills Beautiful" litter patrol crew. She gave a brief speech about how Christmas meant charity and generosity to her, then stepped back as the next candidate was introduced.

I noticed a muttering in the crowd as the next girl left the carriage. "Did you know she was the one who started the rumor about me secretly dating Mr. Reed?" a girl near me said to the girl standing next to her.

"Really? How did you find out?"

"There was a note in my room when I got home from the game."

"From the Secret Santa? Are you sure it's real?"

"It sounds like something she'd do, doesn't it? And I think the Secret Santa has been right about everything else. We should spread the word. I don't want to see her as queen."

"I got a note, too," another girl said. "She was the one who got

everyone started calling me Bones. All the girls who suck up to her, wanting to be popular, did it to make her happy. And the boys who wanted to date her did it.”

“That’s true,” the first girl said. “I heard her say it and laugh about it. So that means my note must be true, too.”

It sounded like the Secret Santa had been busy the night before, and if people had found notes when they got home from the game, that meant anyone who’d been at the game could be removed from the suspect list. I wondered who would know whether Zoe Duff had been there.

More ripples of rumors spread around the crowd, and soon even adults were discussing them. The Secret Santa seemed to be trying to sway the election, or at least eliminate one of the candidates. The queen would be voted on by the general public present at the event. Once all the candidates had been introduced, students went around the park, passing out voting tokens. We were to place our token in the jar near the gazebo that represented the candidate we favored. The candidate with the most tokens at the voting deadline would win.

As a reporter, I figured I should remain neutral, especially since I had inside knowledge about the candidates and the process, so I didn’t take a token and moved to the edge of the crowd where I’d be out of the way. I spotted Charlene arriving at the park and waved to her.

She came over to join me. “It’s too bad about the game,” she said.

Only then did I remember the playoffs. “We lost?”

“Aren’t you the newspaper editor?”

“I had to work tonight, so I took the day off. I didn’t even check e-mail.” Mostly, I’d napped to catch up on the sleep I didn’t get the night before, and then I’d watched a Christmas movie to get myself in the proper spirit for the evening’s activities.

“Well, we lost, barely.”

“I can’t believe people haven’t been talking about that.”

"The pain is probably still too raw. You'd have heard it if they'd won." She stepped closer to me and added softly, "To be honest, I'm not too sad. We had a good run, but I'm looking forward to a break from the games." She raised her voice to a normal level and said, "How did last night go here?"

"Go?"

"You know, all this. Were there tourists?"

"Oh, yeah. In fact, I had to go out to cover some breaking news, and I could barely get my car in and out."

"What breaking news?"

"Some idiot, probably a kid, robbed all the businesses down on the highway. He just took things like candy bars and milkshakes."

"That's pretty brazen."

"It looks like he went down the row, and he was just ahead of the cops. By the time they figured out what he was doing, he stopped and vanished."

It occurred to me then that if the Secret Santa was leaving notes during the game and the robberies had happened at the same time, the robberies could have been meant as a diversion so the police would be too busy to deal with any calls about suspicious-looking people lurking around homes. But Cliff had been a target of the Santa—unless that, too, was a diversion. Making himself the topic of the first note would immediately eliminate him from suspicion.

But Zoe being the primary suspect didn't fit well with this theory. I had a hard time imagining her teaming up with Cliff or going along with the robbery plan. Not that I knew her well, but it didn't fit with the way Margarita had described her.

"Isabella looks lovely," Charlene said. "Whoever got that dress knew what they were doing."

"And they seem to be trying to help her."

"I take it you've heard the chatter."

"Yeah. The Santa was busy last night."

"He dropped off a few presents while he was at it, from what I hear. There were diapers for a poor family, and my neighbor said

she was craving those little powdered sugar donuts, and a package was in her house this morning.”

“Does your neighbor work at the school?”

“No, why?”

“That’s a discussion that should probably wait for work.”

“Now I’m intrigued.”

We promised to catch up Monday morning, and she returned to her family. I moved through the crowd, listening for someone who was discussing the rumors. When I overheard a conversation, I approached the people. “Excuse me, but I couldn’t help but hear what you were discussing. Did you get one of the Secret Santa notes last night? I’m with the newspaper, and I’m looking into this Secret Santa thing.”

“It was there when I got home from the game,” one of the women said. “My daughter says it’s true.”

“Was there anything else?”

“I heard some people got gifts, but I didn’t.”

“Do you have any idea how the Santa got into your house?”

“We don’t have a security system or a camera, or anything like that. But we do have an electronic lock. I thought that was supposed to be more secure.” She shrugged. “I guess it’s a little unsettling that someone got in so easily, but they didn’t take anything or do any damage.”

I thanked her and moved on. When I checked the status of the voting jars, it looked like the secrets were having an impact. The jar of the targeted candidate was noticeably lower. I thought it would have been fairer for the jars to be opaque so people wouldn’t know who was ahead or behind when they cast their votes, but I wasn’t about to say anything, lest I get put in charge for the following year.

The next couple I stopped to interview turned out to be actual tourists, so I didn’t bring up the Secret Santa and instead asked them how they were enjoying the town’s holiday displays. “It’s really nice,” the woman said. “I like all the little shops.”

"The lights are impressive," the man added.

"But it's not very Christmassy," the woman said.

"How so?" I asked, surprised. I couldn't imagine that anyone could look at all this and say it wasn't Christmassy. There was even fake snow blowing around.

"There's just a weird vibe, like a hostility."

"You don't feel welcome?" I asked.

"It's not that. It's just that it seems that people here don't like each other much. I heard all that muttering about the queen candidates. It totally ruined the mood. I guess that's the dark side of small towns."

When they wandered off, I turned around and nearly ran into Jordan. "Ugh," he said.

"I take it you heard that," I said.

"They're not the only ones. I've been picking up a lot of negative feedback from out-of-town visitors. Maybe we should do the queen ceremony separately next year. Do it on a weeknight at the school. Visitors don't care about local popularity. We can have the queen for ceremonial things, but the visitors don't need to see how she's selected. That might cut down on the sense of a gossipy small town."

"It's not just about the queen ceremony," I said.

"Yeah, I had to beg one group not to leave after a brawl broke out near them. They thought we had security issues. Is this all because of that Secret Santa? What do you know about that?"

"Not much more than anyone else, I'm afraid, though maybe I've connected more of the dots." I briefed him on what I knew.

"And the police aren't doing anything?"

"No one's reported anything to the police. They're glad to get the warning or the gift, and nothing's damaged or taken, so they don't report the break-in."

"I wonder what the deal is. Do you think they're trying to sabotage our Christmas?"

"Well, they're giving gifts, too—if it's the same person. That

doesn't seem like sabotage."

"I was hoping these festivities would bring the town together, but now this Secret Santa is tearing us apart, and that may drive the tourists away. I need to think of something to raise positivity levels. It's going to take more than a snow machine, though. Do you have any ideas?"

"What if we fight fire with fire? We could start our own Secret Santa campaign and collect wishes. I can run them anonymously in the newspaper, though of course we'd need to collect contact info. Then people can volunteer to grant the wish and let us know at the newspaper."

"Awesome!" he said, his eyes lighting up. "If there are any big requests that no one grants, let me know."

"I'll go get a box. You can find room for it near the voting table."

I ran to the little shop on Main Street that offered gift wrapping. Jordan had offered the space and materials to groups to wrap gifts for donations as a fundraiser. It wasn't very crowded at the moment, and the girl manning the shop—a member of the pep squad, according to the sign—looked bored. "Do you have an empty box about so big"—I outlined the approximate size with my hands—"that you could wrap for me? Just plain wrapping, no decorations."

She gave me a puzzled frown. "An empty box?"

"Yeah. With a slit in the top. It's to collect things. Like a ballot box or a raffle. Maybe with a lid wrapped separately so I can take it off to get to the things that have been put in it without having to unwrap it."

"Oh, okay. I guess I could do that. Which paper do you want?"

"Do you have one with Santas?"

She turned around and pointed out a roll full of classic Santas in red, fur-trimmed suits. "Like this one?"

"Perfect! I'll be back in a few minutes."

I ran to my office, sat at my computer, and made a sign that

said, “Dear Secret Santa.” In smaller letters, I added, “Selected wishes will be printed anonymously in the newspaper, but leave your name for the newspaper records in case Santa wants to grant your wish.” I printed that, then grabbed a handful of blank paper, took it to the print room, and cut it into slips on the paper cutter. On my way out the door, I shoved a few pens into my pocket. Back at the gift wrap shop, the box was ready for me. I taped the sign to the front of the box, with the help of the gift wrapper, who was far neater than I was.

“Oh, the Secret Santa. I’ve heard about that,” she said. “Do you know who it is?”

“No, but I think we could all be Secret Santas—the good kind that gives gifts people need. That’s what this is about.” I left a donation in the jar and thanked her before taking my box and heading to the park. Jordan had found room for my box near the voting jars, and I set it up with the stack of paper and the pens. It didn’t take long for people to discover it and begin filling out slips. I had no idea what would come of it, but I hoped it was a way to capitalize on the positive things the Secret Santa was doing while distracting from the sharing of negative secrets.

Late in the evening, it was time to crown the Christmas Queen. There wasn’t a lot of suspense about who the winner was because one jar was clearly ahead of the others. Still, I was happy for Isabella when her name was called and she stepped forward for the previous year’s queen to place the crown on her head. To think, she’d come so close to not being able to participate, and then she’d won. But who would be willing to go to the effort the Secret Santa had gone to in order to ensure she was elected? It was possible that it was more about disliking the other candidates than about supporting Isabella, but I thought it was worth looking at who Isabella’s friends were. I didn’t see her being mobbed by supporters after her victory. Her mother hugged her, but she didn’t have a gaggle of friends around her. Maybe that was the point, that she was the candidate for those who felt like outsiders, but this wasn’t

a school-based election. The nominations came from school groups, but the general public voted. Most of the voters wouldn't know the school dynamics, and any tourists who chose to participate wouldn't be aware of any of it.

There were no obvious clues I could see about anyone who was particularly pleased at the outcome. I moved through the crowd, eavesdropping on conversations, but no one gloated about who had won or lost. Most of the remarks I heard were along the lines of, "How nice for Isabella."

Because I needed to take the Secret Santa box home with me, I stayed around until the crowd began to dwindle noticeably. I figured I wouldn't be sleeping until the sound shut off, anyway. The families with little kids in strollers left first, then the families with younger kids. Older adults also left around that time. Finally, the remaining die-hards all looked like they were in their teens and early twenties. I couldn't tell if they were that into the holiday spirit or if there was simply not much else to do in town. There was a slight surge in the crowd when the show at the movie theater let out, and then those people drifted away. When it had been ten minutes since anyone had put anything in the box, I decided to call it a night. I picked up the box, the remaining pens that hadn't been swiped, and the last few slips of paper, and I went back to the office. The music cut off almost as soon as I entered the office, and I sighed in relief at the welcome silence.

I was curious to see what had been left in the box, so I lifted the lid and dumped it out on my desk. One piece of paper stood out because it wasn't a slip cut out of white copy paper. It was a pale green sheet from a memo pad, with a cartoon Santa in the lower left corner. At the top of the page, it said, "Who's been Naughty/Nice?" "Naughty" was circled, and written on the sheet in block capitals were the words, "I know about you and Wes Mosby. Is that a conflict of interest for the newspaper editor? Is that why you take his word over anyone else's?" It was signed "the real Secret Santa."

Chapter Nine

I sat down hard in my desk chair, still holding the note in a hand that trembled ever so slightly. The note was written in block capitals that were somewhat haphazard, almost as though the note had been written by multiple people, switching around every few letters. Or else someone had worked hard to create a ransom note effect while writing by hand. Either way, getting it to look like that had taken some effort, and it would make it difficult to identify the person based on the handwriting. I needed to find another Secret Santa note to compare to it to see if this writing style matched. The word “real” was underlined, which suggested that my Secret Santa project had gotten under the skin of the Secret Santa.

I hadn’t intended the Secret Santa box as a trap for catching the real one, just a way to dilute his influence. But it seemed it had drawn the Santa—or an impostor. I hoped it was the real deal because it would have been more alarming to know that more than one person was out there sharing secrets.

I supposed it wasn’t exactly a secret that would require mind reading to discern that Wes and I were close. We sat together at Margarita’s quite often, and I usually gravitated toward him at public events. I didn’t think we’d given any hint that it was more than that, mostly because it wasn’t. Maybe a couple of hugs, and those had never been in public. The feelings were the part that I thought were less obvious, though it wouldn’t be a stretch to guess at that. I was sure there was gossip about us, especially since it

sounded like some of the police assumed we were an item.

But the part about taking his word over anyone else's bothered me. Did I really do that? I constantly disregarded his warnings about staying out of cases, and I investigated angles he dismissed. True, I didn't run anything in the newspaper that I hadn't verified, and I would hold back information that might interfere with an active investigation, but I didn't think my personal relationship had ever truly affected my reporting. I'd have given the same courtesies to any police department, and I'd take the same precautions about not printing unverified allegations regardless of what the police department said.

My real concern here was who else the Santa might have shared these suspicions with. I hadn't heard of anyone getting a note about their own behavior—unless those who had didn't want to share that fact since it would mean revealing their own secrets. The Santa specialized in telling secrets to other people. I was unlikely to lose my job, since Wes's grandmother was head of the newspaper board and I got the impression that she approved of us being close, but Wes was in a tricky position at the police department. His father had been the previous chief and Wes was expected to step into that role eventually, but then his father had died long before he reached retirement age and Wes had been considered too young to become chief, so they'd hired an outsider. Now Wes did most of the work of the chief while the chief took the credit. There was a risk that the chief saw Wes as a threat to his own position and would take advantage of an opportunity to get his rival out of the way. If the town thought there was a conflict of interest between us, Wes might not be protected by public opinion and his status as a local.

I slid that note into my upper desk drawer and vowed that I wouldn't give anyone any more ammunition against us until we had all this settled. At least I didn't have to worry too much about guarding my thoughts, as long as my usual barriers worked on other mind readers the way they did with Wes. I would have

thought he had similar barriers against other mind readers. The Santa must have guessed based on our behavior, and it was easy to change my behavior.

I swept everything else back into the box, placed the lid on it, and took it to the press room where it wouldn't be visible from outside, then went upstairs to my apartment. The music was already off, so with the aid of a sleep mask I was able to sleep in my own bed. I slept very late the next morning, since the mask also shut out the sunlight.

Not that there was much sunlight. The day was gray, the sky full of clouds heavy with rain. According to the weather app on my phone, it was likely to rain off and on all day, with the highest chances of rain coming in the evening. That didn't bode well for the evening's light show. People might drive by to look at the lights, but there wouldn't be a lot of tourists, and the shops wouldn't get much foot traffic. I chuckled to myself and shook my head when I realized that I was starting to sound like Jordan. I did hope that the previous evening's bad vibe combined with the day's bad weather wouldn't spell doom for the rest of the holiday season.

A rainy day was perfect for curling up on the sofa with a cup of tea and a Christmas movie marathon. I'd thought the lights were on a timer, but it seemed they also had some kind of light trigger, since I noticed when I took a break between movies and went into my bedroom that they came on during the day while the clouds kept the sun hidden. Fortunately, the music didn't come on, as well. I stood in the window, enjoying the way the lights looked through my rain-streaked window.

As much as I tried to shut out thoughts of the note, I couldn't help but return to it. I hadn't been watching the box all evening, and a lot of people had been in the vicinity, so there was no telling who might have put it in. There was a chance I'd been watching the Santa and didn't realize it. There were possibly fingerprints on the note, but that would require showing it to Wes, and I doubted he'd be willing to check, since leaving a note in a box that was out

in a public space was hardly a crime.

I realized I did have one clue, though. The Santa hadn't used my blank paper slips, but rather the same stationery they'd apparently used for other people. I wondered if I could trace it. One of the temporary shops sold Christmas cards, stationery, and gift wrap, and it seemed like a good place to start. I got my umbrella and went down to the office, stopping by my desk to get another look at the note before I went outside.

It was a good day for shopping, since hardly anyone was out. More cars than usual drove up and down Main Street, and all the parking spaces in front of Margarita's restaurant were full, so not everyone was staying home. They just weren't walking on the sidewalks or going into the shops. I reached the stationery shop and paused under the awning to close my umbrella before going inside.

There was some really cute stuff in there—memo pads, sticky notes, notecards, stationery, holiday cards for every seasonal holiday, and wrapping paper. I spotted the familiar design. It came as a memo pad with a magnet on the back, like for a shopping list to keep on the fridge, and there were matching notecards. I picked up one of the memo pads and approached the clerk. "Excuse me, but do you have any idea who might have bought this memo pad?" I asked.

She looked up from her magazine to glance at the pad. "A lot of people," she said. "That's one of our more popular items. It's so cute. I keep having to restock it."

"Can you remember anyone in particular? Anyone you know?"

She gave me a suspicious look, and I realized how weird my question sounded. I wasn't a cop, so I couldn't make anyone hand over their customer records. "No," she said.

"I got an anonymous note written on this paper," I explained. "I was trying to figure out who might have sent it."

"Oh, that Secret Santa thing?" She grinned. "What did you do?"

"I got the note. The notes are usually about something someone

else did.” Okay, not in my case, but I wasn’t going to go so far as to confess to get her cooperation.

She shrugged. “Like I said, a lot of people have bought it. And it’s cheap, so most people pay cash. I wouldn’t have customer records, even if I wanted to give them to you. Which I don’t. I’d have to talk to my boss.” Which was probably Jordan, so I supposed I could always ask him, but I had to agree that it probably wouldn’t do me much good. “Are you gonna buy that?” she added.

“I want to look around some more,” I said. I ended up getting holiday cards for all the people who worked with the newspaper and a couple of rolls of wrapping paper. I needed to do some Christmas shopping, since I now had wrapping paper but no gifts. I’d been so distracted by everything else that was going on that I’d forgotten entirely. I wasn’t even sure who should be on my gift list. Charlene and I hadn’t discussed exchanging gifts, but I was her boss, so I figured I should get her something. I had a few family members to shop for. I wanted to get something for Margarita. Wes was the big question mark. Were we yet at the gift stage of whatever our relationship was? If I could cook at all, I could make him some cookies or homemade bread, or something like that, but I didn’t think a package of cookies I bought would work the same way. I did some window shopping on the way home, hoping something would catch my eye and give me ideas.

It was raining in earnest by the evening, so I didn’t even try to go out. My Secret Santa box wouldn’t survive the deluge. I supposed I could have found a shop or restaurant to put it in, but I doubted there would be enough foot traffic to make it worth the effort. And if I was at home, I didn’t have to worry about either avoiding Wes or looking like I was too cozy with him. No one but Jean could watch what I was doing when I was home alone.

The next morning, I took a cup of tea down to my desk and emptied the box again. There were a few crude obscene drawings, which went straight into the trash, along with a few curses, which

also got trashed. It seemed there were always some people who couldn't resist the urge to be nasty when they were anonymous.

Among the rest, there were a few in childish handwriting I couldn't quite make out, signed with just a first name. I put those in a stack I could use as letters to Santa artwork. I took more time with the ones that appeared to be more serious. A few were requests for that year's must-have (but impossible to find) toy, but most were for necessities like a winter coat for a child, a turkey for Christmas dinner, or a wheelchair ramp for a house. I'd just started a spreadsheet to sort and organize the information when Charlene arrived. "Oh, you were the one who put out the Secret Santa box?" she said. "I noticed it the other night."

"Yeah, things were getting pretty negative Saturday night, so I thought this might be a way to counter it. I'll run the requests anonymously, and if anyone wants to grant the wish, they can contact the paper. Depending on how it goes, we may have some extra admin work to deal with."

"I'm up for it. We don't have so many weddings at this time of year for me to write up, so I have free time."

"I figure if we get totally swamped, I can see if Tami wants to make some extra cash." Tami was the high school student who provided tech support for the newspaper. "She's scheduled to come in this afternoon to do a system upgrade."

"Do you want me to deal with those now? I imagine you have a story or two to write."

"You'd know better than I do if these look legitimate or if someone is trying to pull a scam," I said. I told her where to find the spreadsheet on the server and collected the stack of notes I hadn't yet gone through.

While she entered the information, I wrote the story that would go with the Secret Santa feature. Doing our own Secret Santa gave me an excuse to write about that other Secret Santa without sinking into rumors. I turned it into a fun little mystery that could inspire everyone, focusing on the gifts rather than on the rumors.

And if it helped flush out that other Secret Santa or spurred someone to identify them, that was good, too. It wasn't just about my own issue. I worried that it could escalate. If they could manipulate the choice of the Christmas Queen, what else could they do? There was potentially a lot of harm. I wasn't sure which might be worse, if the information they shared was true or a lie. The fact that they'd been right about many things meant that people might assume that lies were true, too. I didn't want to stop the good deeds, but I did want to stop the rumor mill.

"Okay, everything's in the spreadsheet," Charlene said after we'd been working in companionable silence for about an hour. "There are several quite serious needs that appear to be legitimate. There are a lot of little wishes—things like toys. Only some of those included contact info, and I know a few of them probably can't get them for themselves. A few others can certainly get their own toys. And there were a number of general wishes that weren't signed—things like world peace or prayer requests."

"I think if I put the box out again, I'll print up slips with more detailed instructions and spaces for contact info," I said. "People may have been confused."

"Yeah, it seems like half the people thought this was a general 'letters to Santa' thing or a prayer request box."

"You didn't see some of the other fun things that were in there. I already threw that stuff away."

"I can imagine," she said with a laugh. "Oh, you mentioned the other night there was something we'd need to talk about in the office."

I tried to recall what that would have been, then remembered that I was going to ask her about the secretary. "We talked on Friday about how someone in the school office would know a lot of what was going on."

"Yes, you mentioned a lot of the cases seem to connect through the school."

Not mine, though people who worked at the school didn't

spend all their time there, and Wes and I had been at a number of very public events. That was still my best lead. "What do you know about Zoe Duff?"

"If anyone knows the town's secrets, it's probably her, but I can't picture her breaking into people's homes."

"Does she have kids or grandkids?"

"I think she has at least a couple who are in high school."

Which meant there was the possibility that she had accomplices or that there was someone else with the same gift. "Was she at the game on Friday?"

"I believe I saw her there."

"So she couldn't have been leaving the notes and gifts during the game. She could be the information source, but someone else must be doing the sneaking around. I'm surprised they haven't been caught by any security systems. It's a little scary knowing there's someone out there who can so easily get in and out of people's houses. So far, they haven't taken anything or done any harm. But they could."

"We have people in town who can do all kinds of things."

"Someone with that electrical gift could bypass a security system."

"Maybe it's a team, a mind reader and a person with the electrical gift."

"The electrical people are easy to spot," I said. "You just look for those who aren't on social media and don't carry cell phones, though I suppose that's trying to prove a negative, since not everyone walks around looking at their phones all the time. The mind readers tend to keep that gift to themselves."

"Can you blame them?" she asked. "No one who knew about it would be comfortable around them."

I didn't think she knew about Wes, but I ventured, "Is it possible that Zoe has that gift, and that's how she knows everything at the school? Or is she just observant?"

She frowned. "Hard to say. Her position means she sees a lot.

She gets the phone calls from parents when a kid is sick or has to leave school early. She knows who's getting in trouble and being sent to the office. She knows when a kid forgot something—though probably less of that now that most kids carry phones and don't need to go to the office to call home. Still, a lot of information passes through the school office.”

Jean appeared and said, “Enough about this Secret Santa. Sure, it'll move some papers, but I think the crime spree is the real story.”

“Crime spree?” Charlene asked.

“There's someone holding up businesses,” Jean said. “It reminds me of the days of Bonnie and Clyde. You know they were from around here, right? They were active in this part of the world while I was running the newspaper. Didn't hit Stirling Mills, though.” She chuckled. “They'd have been in for a big surprise if they had.”

“Bonnie and Clyde took more than candy bars,” I said, then explained the Friday-night crime spree to Charlene. “The police are pretty sure it's a kid playing a prank. I interviewed the people he held up, and they think the gun's a toy,” I concluded.

“Maybe he's softening them up and he'll pull out the real gun later,” Jean said.

“Why would he do that?” I asked. “The other way around would make more sense—get people to think he's a real danger so they comply more readily the next time. If they think the gun's a toy, that would just force him to shoot later, and I don't think that's what he's after. Everyone he hit the other night was a kid, and anyone working during the playoff game probably needed the job. It seems to me like a weird form of bullying. He's enjoying terrorizing them, but then his crime is pretty minimal. It's all about feeling like he's got power over people.”

“That could escalate, though,” Charlene said. “Eventually, he may want to scare them even more.”

“I wondered if the robberies were some kind of diversion,” I

said. "They happened while the Secret Santa was leaving notes during the game. It kept the police focused elsewhere."

"You're not saying the Secret Santa and the bandit are working together, are you?" Jean asked. "Though it would make a great story."

"Right now, I'm just going to mention the string of robberies and what the robber took. No mention of the toy gun. We don't want to goad him into escalating."

"The Sweet Tooth Bandit," Jean said.

"There's our headline," I said, turning back to my computer and adding it to the article I was working on.

"Too bad you can't give me credit," Jean said.

"Half the town wouldn't be at all surprised, and the other half would think we were nuts," Charlene said.

The freelancers covering the playoffs turned in their articles that afternoon, so by the end of the day, the week's paper was almost completely full. I'd scanned some of the cuter notes to the Secret Santa to use as artwork to go with that feature, and combined with the article and the wishes, that filled half a page. There was the bandit, with a photo the police provided taken by a security camera and contact information if anyone could identify the bandit, a report on the holiday events, and lots of football action shots. We just needed the information the various community groups provided, and we were set, unless something big happened before Thursday. It was shaping up to be an easy week, which meant I had time to get to the bottom of the Secret Santa and do some digging about the bandit.

I was updating the newspaper's social media accounts when Tami showed up late that afternoon. "Ready for me to mess with your computers?" she said.

Charlene got out of her chair and gestured toward it. "Be my guest."

"Go on home," I told Charlene. "We got a lot done today, and there's no point in you hanging around while you can't use your

computer.”

“I’m going to do some shopping, I think,” she said as she put on her coat. “See you tomorrow.”

Tami sat at Charlene’s desk and tapped on her keyboard, then sat back. “That’ll take awhile. Now for yours.”

I left my chair and went to make a cup of tea. When she’d started the update on my computer, I asked, “What are you hearing about this Secret Santa at the school?”

“People have been finding notes in their pockets letting them know what their friends are saying about them behind their backs. It’s like a Christmas-themed Gossip Girl thing.”

“Do you know of any gifts that have been left?”

“At school it’s little things like enough money for lunch or a snack when someone’s hungry.”

“So it’s got to be someone at the school.” Which confirmed my theory, and it gave me an idea. “Are you interested in getting involved in an investigation?”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Ten

Tami grinned. “I thought you’d never ask. You’re going to try to catch the Santa?”

“At least figure out who it is. Do you know Mrs. Duff in the office?”

“Yeah, she’s related to me.”

“And you know about the family trait?”

She gasped. “Oh! That’s how she does it! I should have realized. You can’t get away with *anything* at the school. Just *think* about doing something, and the principal is on your case. Sometimes I wish I got that gift, but then I think life is probably easier without it. I’m not sure I’d want to know what everyone in school was thinking. It would be distracting. You believe she’s the Santa?”

“Or she’s working with someone who is. I just want to test something. How good are you at focusing your mind? Could you think something without also thinking about the reason you’re thinking it?”

“I might be able to. Wes says it has to be verbalized thoughts. As long as you don’t put the thoughts into words, he doesn’t pick them up, and he hears the ‘loudest’ thoughts, so if you’re focusing on something, then that’s all he hears. I learned when I was really little how to play cards with him. I had to sing a song in my head so I didn’t always lose at Go Fish.”

“Then we need to come up with something you can think when you go by the office that might make the Secret Santa take action.

Something good. I don't want to start a rumor or get someone targeted. Maybe something someone needs. It has to be obvious enough that we'll know if the Santa does it, but not so obvious that even someone who couldn't read minds might figure it out."

We brainstormed, then decided that Tami was going to be worried about not being able to sell any of the tins of cookies she was supposed to have sold as a fundraiser for the computer club. "It's true," she said. "I wanted to have a 'bring in your gear and we'll make sure it's all updated and optimized' day and let people give us donations, but the teacher said there was too much liability potential in case we messed something up, so she went with a project from some school fundraiser catalog. I hate selling stuff, and those cookies always suck, anyway, so I haven't even tried to sell any. But I'll get in trouble if I don't sell the minimum. What do you think the Santa would do about that?"

"I doubt she'd be able to order anonymously. But you might get some money and a note to donate the cookies, or people will get notes telling them to buy from you."

"I'll also have one of my friends think something about me that someone would want to warn me about, just to cover our bases." She grinned. "This is going to be fun."

"But only think this stuff around the office, and make sure that you're not thinking about what you're doing. Be very focused. It's like playing cards with Wes."

"Believe me, in my family, I've had plenty of practice."

She turned back to my computer to check its progress, then got up and went over to Charlene's. It occurred to me that she might know something about the other case I was writing about. "Do you know Cliff Raglan?"

She glanced up at me and rolled her eyes. "He's a jerk. He used to be okay, but now he's just obnoxious."

"Do you think he'd do something like rob a convenience store?"

"He doesn't need to. His dad has tons of money." Her disgusted sneer told me what she thought about that.

“What if he only took a candy bar?”

“Seriously? That’s what’s been happening? I’ve heard there were robberies, but not about the candy bars.”

“At the convenience stores, it’s candy bars. At the fast-food places he demands milkshakes or pies.”

“And Cliff’s doing it?”

“I don’t know. But one of the clerks said she’s sure it was him.”

“Meg?”

“How did you know?” Maybe Tami was more of a mind reader than she realized.

She shrugged. “She’s the first person I thought of who works at a convenience store and really hates Cliff.”

“Is there some reason for the bad blood?”

“They used to be friends before his dad got rich, and then he started being a jerk to her. She was really hurt. I think she liked him—you know, as more than a friend.”

“So she’s not exactly neutral where he’s concerned. She has reason to want to get him in trouble.”

“On the other hand, she knows him really well, so she may have recognized him.”

“But when she was given a lineup of security footage from a variety of robberies, she couldn’t identify him from it.”

“Things are different in person. It could have been his voice.”

“Everyone said he used a funny voice during the robberies.”

“She might have recognized his funny voice. It might have been something he did when they were goofing around as kids, though that would be pretty dumb of him to use the same voice in a robbery.”

I sipped my tea, inhaling the spicy scent of the holiday blend. “Maybe she recognized his cologne or his body wash,” I mused out loud. “That wouldn’t show up in a photo.” But now that I knew Meg and Cliff had a history, I knew I’d have to be particularly careful about using her as a source. If Wes was aware of that, I could see why he wasn’t prepared to take her accusation seriously.

"If it is Cliff, he won't be able to keep his mouth shut for long," Tami said. "He'll be blabbing soon enough. It'll drive him nuts that no one knows what he's been getting away with."

"Let me know if you hear anything."

"Don't worry, your junior reporter is on the case." She finished with the computers and left, promising to keep me posted. I would have loved to go to the school to see what happened with our sting, but I couldn't think of a good excuse, and I didn't want to ruin things by arousing suspicion with my presence. I had to trust in Tami. She'd come through for me before.

AFTER TAKING SUNDAY Off, I was actually eager to take my walk among the lights that evening. Margarita's restaurant was closed on Mondays, so she joined me. The weather was a lot cooler after the previous day's rain, so we had to walk briskly to stay warm, which meant we were getting a decent workout, though I wasn't sure it outweighed the pizza we'd had for dinner. "I haven't really paid much attention to all this, I've been so busy," Margarita said. "It's actually rather nice."

"Your living room overlooks Main Street. You haven't looked out to see it yet?"

"Like I even make it to my living room. I come home and fall on my bed."

"Then you're lucky you don't have the lights and music piped in to your bedroom."

"Oh. Is it bad?"

If there was anyone I could admit that I wasn't entirely happy with the lights to, it was Margarita. "It's not too bad on weeknights because they shut it off earlier. Friday night was pretty obnoxious, though. I slept on the sofa, then woke up in the middle of the night because I was uncomfortable and went to my bed."

"I suspect they've shut down by the time I get home. People

have been hanging around until we practically have to kick them out, and then we have to clean the dining room.”

“And that’s without you serving alcohol, so they aren’t lingering over drinks.”

“I think they just like sitting and looking out the windows at the street. Or they’ve been walking and are enjoying sitting down and relaxing. Those are the ones who tend to come in later. I guess they think if it’s the end of the evening they won’t have to get up to make room for anyone else, but they forget that we might want to close and go home.”

While we walked, I caught her up on the bandit and the Secret Santa. I didn’t tell her about our sting because I wanted to limit who knew about it. Not that I didn’t trust her, but if we were dealing with a mind reader, the fewer people who knew, the better our chances were of it working. “So, it was a busy weekend,” I concluded.

“The Santa got Josie,” she said. “In a good way. She’s been worried about gas money for getting to and from school. That’s a long drive for her to make three days a week, and the price of gas always seems to go up around the holidays. Last night, she was cashing out and found a gift card for a gas station in her apron pocket. She hadn’t told anyone about her worries.”

“I should interview her,” I said. “I’m doing a story, and that’s a good one. We can keep it anonymous, if she likes. Does she have any idea who gave her the card? Does she remember who was at her tables?”

“It was a crazy night. So many people were in there. And it didn’t even have to be one of her tables. Anyone could have slipped something in her pocket as she went past.”

“Do you know if Zoe Duff was in the restaurant?”

“You’re following up on that?”

“Yeah. I can connect most of the cases through the high school. But not Josie.”

“Actually, she was in on Saturday. It looked like the school

office staff was having a get-together. But Josie didn't get the card until Sunday."

"It looks like we have a good suspect, then. She could have sensed Josie's worries on Saturday and then sent her accomplice with the card on Sunday." We just needed Tami's sting to confirm it.

I noticed Wes at the park when we reached it, but I forced myself not to look in his direction. "Hey, there's Wes. We should say hi," Margarita said.

"Nah, that's okay. He's working," I said.

"Oh, did you two have a fight, or something?"

"No, not really. We do seem to disagree about Christmas, though. He's a grouch about it."

"You're avoiding him because of that? Is he ruining your holiday spirit, or something?"

"No, that's not it." I supposed that Margarita was one person I could talk to about this, so I might as well confess. "And I got a Secret Santa note about him."

"Ooh, what secret about him did they tell you?"

"It was about us and how I had a conflict of interest because I do what he tells me."

She snorted in laughter. "Well, there goes the Secret Santa's credibility."

"But I could see how someone might think that way. I'm not so worried about myself, but it could affect him. I know things aren't great between him and the chief, and there's already gossip about us at the department. Hector assumed we were dating and seemed to think I showed up at a crime scene looking for Wes."

"So you're staying away from him for his own good." She gave a dramatic fake sigh. "How romantic."

I elbowed her in the ribs. "I just don't want to give anyone any ammunition until I have a better idea who the Santa is and what their aim is. The note came across as a bit of a threat, and I figure if I don't spend a lot of time with Wes, it ruins the Santa's ability to

do anything about that threat.”

“Or you could go the opposite direction and give him a big kiss in public. They can’t threaten to expose something that’s already obvious.”

“But that would end up having the effect I’m trying to avoid, confirming any suspicions or rumors.”

“Or is this just an excuse? You two like each other. That much is obvious. Everyone assumes you’re either together or on the verge of it. Is it really about your reputation?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Maybe I’m a little scared. I’ve always known I’d probably be moving within a year or two, which has tended to make me a lot more fearless about relationships. If things blew up, I soon wouldn’t be seeing him again, anyway. But I plan to stick around here for more than a couple of years. That makes me nervous about starting something. What if it goes wrong? I’ll still have to deal with him. And I can’t totally dismiss the credibility issue. Do people really think I follow the police department party line because I’m tight with Wes? If they do, that could hurt the way the paper is seen.”

“Frankly, I don’t think most people will care.”

“Jean does.”

“Jean was dead before you were born. What can she do to you?”

“She can annoy me. A lot.”

“She can’t know what you do away from the newspaper.”

“True.”

“And if you figure out who this Santa is, then you’ve got leverage over them.”

Again, I wished I could tell her something was in the works, but the fewer people who could think about it, the better. There was one way she might help, though. “Did Josie’s gift card come with a note?” I asked.

“I think so. Oh! You want to check it against the one you got to see if it’s from the same person. Good idea. She doesn’t work until

later this week because of finals, but I'll ask her to bring the note when she comes in."

"Maybe I'll check with Marisol tomorrow, while I'm at it. I should probably get a quote from her about Isabella as queen, anyway."

"And what if it turns out to be different people from who sent your note?"

"Then I'll have to find and expose that one, too."

After we walked to and around the park, we agreed that it was too cold to be outside much longer and went to the movie theater for a showing of *The Holiday*, though we disagreed about whether or not it was really a Christmas movie. "Most of it takes place after Christmas," I argued. "It happens in between Christmas and the New Year."

"But it's about all the holidays. And it's got snow and decorations," Margarita said.

"Oh, do I have some movies to show you, if you want snow and decorations."

"But do they have Jude Law?"

In spite of my arguments, I enjoyed watching the movie, though I was distracted by thoughts of my sting. I couldn't wait to hear from Tami, though I knew it might take a few days before we got results. I called Marisol the next morning, and she took a picture of her note and sent it to me. It was hard to tell without having the note itself to compare, but the style of writing looked similar, like either someone was trying to vary their handwriting or it was a committee effort, and it was on the same paper as my note, with the "nice" in "Naughty/Nice" circled.

Not that this told me much. It just felt good to confirm something, to have one answer. I anxiously awaited the end of the school day, when I might hear from Tami. She called, and I jumped when I saw her number on my screen. "We did it," she reported. "No results yet. Maybe that'll come tomorrow. But the messages were definitely sent."

“Good, thanks,” I said.

I stayed in that evening, mostly because I was too chicken to face Wes. If I didn’t go out, I didn’t have to decide whether or not to talk to him, and I didn’t have to worry about what anyone read into our interactions. I would have said we were at the awkward misunderstanding part of one of those Christmas romance movies, but I didn’t think our relationship had gone that far. We were still in the “bumping into each other around town and having chemistry-laden moments” phase. We’d need to be a lot more involved for us to split up because we were trying to spare each other.

In mid-movie, Jean appeared in my apartment. “The Sweet Tooth Bandit struck again!”

“I’ll get the information from the police tomorrow,” I said.

“You aren’t going to do anything?”

“Like what?” I asked, probably a little testier than I should have been, since I was taking my concerns about my relationship with Wes out on her. Not that she didn’t deserve it, since she was the one who first instilled those doubts. “The guy’s probably long-gone by now. I’ve already interviewed victims. What, exactly, am I supposed to do about it?”

“You could figure out a way to test whether that guy the girl named really is the bandit.”

“How? I don’t even know if that girl is right about him. She has a grudge and could be trying to get him in trouble. You said I can’t run his name in the paper without an arrest. I’d love to catch him, but there’s not anything I can do that the police aren’t doing already.”

“That hasn’t stopped you before. How many cases have you solved before the police figured them out?”

She had a point, but the only thing I could think of was to stake out a convenience store and see if he struck, then dramatically unmask him. It would mean several nights away from the non-stop holiday music, though the store probably had it, too, so it wouldn’t

be much of an escape. “I’m focusing on the Secret Santa,” I said. “That’s closer to being in my jurisdiction.”

Unfortunately, we hadn’t come any closer to solving that case, either, by the time we went to press on Thursday night. Tami and her friend hadn’t seen any results, which meant either Zoe wasn’t our Secret Santa, or she’d seen through the effort. I was a bit downcast when I got to Margarita’s restaurant for dinner that night. Josie greeted me when I arrived. “How did finals go?” I asked.

“I have no idea. By the time I was done, I wasn’t sure I got my own name right. I’m just glad they’re over. Only two more semesters to go at this pace.” She stepped closer and said softly, “I brought that note. Give me a second to check on my tables, and I’ll show it to you.”

“Thanks.” I found a seat at the bar, and after she’d refilled drinks and taken dessert orders, she came over to me.

“Here it is,” she said, taking a folded note out of her apron pocket and opening it on the bar. It used the same Santa memo pad as the note I’d received, and the handwriting looked the same. I got out my note to compare the two. I was so focused that I was taken totally by surprise when Wes showed up and took the seat by me. “What’s up?” he asked.

Chapter Eleven

I managed to slide my note under a napkin as Josie picked up hers and showed it to Wes. “The Secret Santa got me the other night,” she said. “This was with a gas station gift card that I found in my apron pocket.”

While he studied her note, I put mine in my pocket. He didn’t seem to have noticed, or at least he didn’t ask any questions about what I was hiding.

“I take it you needed gas,” he said.

“The trip to the college is pretty far,” Josie said. “It adds up. I’ve been worrying about it. I’ve had finals, so I haven’t been able to work as much while I was studying and I’ve had to make more trips to campus. I wasn’t sure I had enough money for gas, then this showed up.”

“Did you tell anyone?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. Maybe the closest I came to that was the last time I filled up, when I pre-paid with the money I had with me and I joked with the clerk that I hoped it was enough to get me to school and back. But maybe I said something at work. I might have remarked about how a table’s tip might buy me a trip to a final. I don’t know. Saturday was kind of a blur. I don’t remember what I said. But is this really a police matter? Giving people stuff isn’t a crime.”

“I’m more concerned about the rumors that are being spread and the number of fights that seems to be causing. Somebody’s

going to get hurt.”

“Well, whatever else they did, they made my day by taking a huge weight off my mind. I took my last final yesterday, and I was able to focus without wondering if I was going to have to coast home on fumes.”

“I thought you didn’t think it was worth digging into,” I remarked to Wes when Josie had gone back to work.

“Not officially. But I am curious. Do you have any leads?”

“I feel like we’re having a role reversal here. You’re asking me about the progress of one of my cases. Aren’t you the cop?”

“This is personal curiosity. So, any leads? I know you’re looking into it.”

“Nothing that’s panned out yet.”

“Please tell me you haven’t done anything wacky.”

“Me? Wacky? Of course not.” Abruptly changing the subject before he could ask me to specify what I had done, I said, “I hear the Sweet Tooth Bandit struck again last night.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve named him.”

“It was Jean, and it’s already being printed, as we speak, so it’s too late to complain. I’m curious, have you done anything to follow up on the lead you have?”

“Like I told you, she couldn’t identify him from the video.”

“There are things she might notice in reality that aren’t in video.”

“I’m sure there are. But I’m not going to discuss that investigation.”

“So you’re not keeping an eye on the person of interest? Or staking out convenience stores to catch him red-handed?”

“We barely have the staff to keep an eye on the crowds downtown and maintain our regular patrols, as it is. We can’t leave someone sitting outside a convenience store in case someone dramatically swipes a candy bar.”

Margarita came out of the kitchen with a paper bag, which she handed to Wes. “Enjoy your tacos,” she said.

"I'm sure the whole gang at the station will," he said. He left with the bag, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed. I didn't want to give rumors more opportunity to swirl if it looked like we were on a dinner date, but I had to admit that I missed hanging out with him.

"Did you tell him about the note?" Margarita asked softly.

"Nope. And I'm not going to. It would make things weirder."

"Or it might make things less weird by clearing the air."

"Things aren't really that weird when it's just us. The problem is all the people around us trying to make it weird."

"Okay, as long as you're good."

That was the real question. Was I good?

I finished my meal and headed out into the crowds on the sidewalks. I found myself studying the people I passed, wondering which one of them might be the Secret Santa and why they were doing what they were doing. Was it someone who'd started out trying to hurt someone, then began giving gifts when they felt bad about that, or was there some other motive? Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought there was tension in the air, with people being less friendly. They eyed each other warily, as though they weren't sure who they could trust. I hoped my Secret Santa plan might do something to improve the mood.

I could hardly wait for the paper to come out the next morning. I got to my desk early, armed with a big mug of tea, and waited for the phone to start ringing. Charlene also got to work early, bringing with her a basket of muffins. "Royce has discovered baking," she announced. Her husband had become interested in cooking after he retired, and we benefited in the office.

The phone rang, and both of us jumped, then laughed about how on edge we were. When Charlene answered, I could hardly bear the anxiety of waiting to learn what the call was about. Were people reacting to the Secret Santa project, and how were they reacting? I was tempted to pick up my phone and listen in, but I settled for hearing her side of the conversation. "You would? Okay,

that would be lovely. I'm sure they'll appreciate it. I'll put you down for it. Let me get your information." She braced the receiver between her ear and shoulder and typed, then said, "You can bring it to the newspaper office and we'll make sure it gets to them. Thank you."

She hung up and smiled at me. "That's one wish granted. Dance class tuition for the little girl who wants to be a ballerina but can't afford the class."

"Wonderful!"

The phone began ringing in earnest then, and it took both of us to keep up with all the calls. By lunchtime, all the requests had been filled. "I'm going to have to put the box out again tonight," I said. "We'll need to get more wishes for next week."

More calls came in later in the day, many of them requests from people who'd seen the feature in the paper and hadn't known about the box. Charlene added those to the spreadsheet. I designed forms to put out that evening, and Charlene used florist's tape to secure silk poinsettias to some pens to make it less likely that people would accidentally walk away with them.

Among all the calls about wishes, I hoped someone would have some insight into that other Secret Santa. We did get some reports of gifts people had received, but nothing that helped narrow in on the Santa's identity. A few people called us with tips of notes the Santa had left for them, but it was all gossip, not news we'd want to cover. I kept a list, though, in the hope that it might establish a pattern.

Actually, it did quite the opposite. The more information I had, the further I was from the school being the common point. People had learned who vandalized their homes or cars and what their kids were really doing, which would have a link to the high school, since the vandals were teens, but there was also news about affairs and bosses who weren't planning to give bonuses. I couldn't see any pattern at all, which suggested that my guess about Zoe being the source was wrong. The people the information was about and

the people reporting it lived all over town and worked in a variety of places. I felt like I knew less than I had when all this started.

I set up the Secret Santa box in front of the newspaper office that night. There was a lot of foot traffic on Main Street, so I figured it would get enough attention, and it would be a lot easier for me to keep an eye on it and to replenish supplies outside my office than it would be in the park. I hoped there would be fewer obscene drawings when I was watching the box. I made myself a cup of cocoa and set up a folding chair next to the small table in the newspaper's doorway where I'd put the box. I smiled and greeted people as they passed. It was actually rather festive, sitting there surrounded by the lights, with the Christmas music playing and people strolling up and down the street. A few people asked me what the box was about, and I explained. Fewer people than I expected stopped to write something down, but more people said they'd look for the feature in the newspaper that week.

It occurred to me that this was a good advertising opportunity. I had some extra copies in the press room, and I ran back there to get them. If someone asked me about the Secret Santa, I took that as a sign that they hadn't read the newspaper, so I handed them a copy. Maybe I'd pick up some new subscribers. If they were tourists, then they'd learn more about the town and see the ads for local businesses.

I tried not to stare when I saw Wes coming down the sidewalk toward me. I was so torn. I was glad to see him, but it was hard to avoid him when he kept approaching me. "You've given up on strolling?" he remarked when he reached me.

"I've seen it all by now. Tonight I'm people-watching and babysitting the box." I patted the Secret Santa box.

"I saw that in the paper this morning. How did it go?"

"All the wishes have been fulfilled, so I need to collect a few more for next week."

"I wonder what our other Secret Santa thinks about having their thunder stolen."

“We may find out.”

He grinned. “Ah, so it’s a trap. That’s why you’re sitting there with the box.”

“The security system camera will show who’s putting in notes, so I may be able to see it if they use their usual stationery.”

Raised voices from across the street caught our attention, and both of us looked over there to see a group of boys in front of Ruthie’s gallery. “That’s Cliff Raglan, isn’t it?” I said. “The blond one the others don’t seem to like.”

“Yeah.” He kept watch over the group, but didn’t move toward them. They weren’t getting physical, just yelling. Cliff never lost his smirk, even though much larger boys were clearly unhappy with him. He shrugged it off as the others walked on. Wes didn’t relax his guard until the other group was a block away. “Looks like one fight I won’t have to break up tonight.”

“There have been a lot?”

“People are on edge with all these secrets coming out. There have been a few confrontations, but nothing so severe that I’ve had to haul anyone away in cuffs.”

“I hope that doesn’t scare away tourists. We don’t want people to think this is a violent place. If people are attacking others in public, you have to worry when the guns are going to come out.”

“I’ve been worried about that, too. In fact, I’m surprised that hasn’t happened yet.”

His radio crackled, and he stepped away to respond. At the same time, Jean came floating out through the front window. “The bandit just struck again!” she reported. I glanced across the street, looking for Cliff. I no longer saw him, but we’d been watching him at around the time the robbery must have happened, and I knew from experience that someone would have had to be able to teleport to get to the strip of businesses the bandit targeted in less than half an hour, given the traffic in the downtown area. So, Cliff wasn’t the Sweet Tooth Bandit, after all.

Wes returned to me. “Let me guess, the Sweet Tooth Bandit

struck again,” I said.

He blinked in surprise. “How did you know?”

I thought about letting him stew in mystery, but I admitted, “Jean heard it on the scanner just now.”

“And you notice who’s currently downtown. He had an alibi for the other night, too—and not just his best friends or his family. He was in a public place.”

“I guess Meg was wrong about her suspect. She seemed so sure.”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t mind pinning something on that kid because he’s a smug jerk who thinks he can get away with anything, but I don’t think he’s doing this.”

“Do you have any other suspects?”

“Not that I can talk about. It’s an ongoing investigation. At the moment, it’s not a huge priority because he takes so little and no one’s been hurt. My main concern is that eventually this won’t be a big enough thrill and he’ll escalate, or else he’ll hit the wrong clerk and get hurt.”

“He’s got to be a kid, since he only seems to hit when it’s another kid on duty. He’s enjoying having power over other kids and knowing they can’t do anything about it.”

“Listen to you, Miss FBI Profiler.”

“Well, it makes sense. The question is whether it’s someone who usually feels powerless who’s lashing out or if he’s more of a bully.”

“The kids he’s hit are more likely to be bully targets. None of them have a reputation for bullying anyone else. I’m thinking it’s someone trying to test limits and terrorize kids who have to work for a living.”

“So someone like Cliff, but apparently not Cliff, unless we’ve got a copycat—and you can’t blame the newspaper if we do because the article about it didn’t come out until this morning, and the first robbery for which Cliff had an alibi happened earlier in the week.”

"I just wish he'd knock it off. At least wait until after the holidays. We're stretched so thin right now. I'm having to hire some off-duty guys from neighboring cities to provide the downtown security and maintain our usual activities."

"Have there been any security issues? I mean, other than the fights you've had to break up."

"One attempted purse-snatching. Lots of minor traffic accidents. We've started directing traffic at the major intersections and entrances to parking lots. Next year, we may set up a temporary suggested detour for through traffic and put up warning signs at the business route cutoff so anyone who comes in will know what they're getting into. The problem is, I suspect most of the traffic is coming here."

"We had enough people here during the game last week to suggest that we're getting a lot of tourists. That's good for business."

He sighed. "I suppose. But do we really need it? This town has usually tried to be quiet and keep to ourselves. We don't want a lot of outsiders."

"Wow. Thanks."

"You're not an outsider. You live here. You understand the secrets and why we keep them."

He stopped talking as a group approached us and paused to look at the Secret Santa box. I went through my spiel to explain it and handed them a newspaper. When they'd moved on, I turned back to Wes, but he was gone. I saw him on the other side of the street, continuing his rounds.

"Ugh, that Secret Santa," someone said. "I've heard about that."

"I think you're talking about a different one," I said. "This is an effort by the newspaper to match people who want to fulfill holiday wishes with people who have needs. Did you get one of those notes?"

The woman shook her head. "No. I wish. Someone got one about me." With a rueful grin, she added, "Unfortunately, it was

true. I have no idea how they knew. I don't think I've ever said anything to anyone, but it lost me a friend."

"I won't ask you to tell me what it was, but can I ask you if you're involved with the high school in any way?"

"No, why?"

"I had a theory about how the Santa was getting information. A lot of the earlier cases had a link to the school. Were you at the game last Friday?"

"No. I don't have kids in school, I don't work there, and I'm not close to anyone who does. Does that help?"

"It helps kill my pet theory. But it doesn't help narrow down who it might be."

"Well, I hope they get caught soon so they stop all this. I don't know what kind of creep would get their kicks ruining people's lives, and I don't care how many nice things they do for needy people along the way." She stepped aside so a cluster of teenage girls could pass, then added. "You can quote me on that if you like. I'll even give you my name."

I took one of the Santa slips and a pen and wrote down her quote and her info. After she left, I did some more "man on the street" interviews, asking people if they'd been targeted by the Santa or if they'd received information. I found that the people who hadn't been targeted were even more worried than those who had been. They didn't want to give me a comment. "That would just be asking for it," one woman said. "I don't want to get his attention." I got the impression that just about everyone in town had a secret they were afraid would come out.

When the foot traffic tapered off, I decided to call it a night. I brought everything inside and locked the door. I couldn't wait to see what was in the box, as tired as I was, so I emptied it onto my desk. There were a lot fewer crude cartoons and only a few "letter to Santa" type notes that looked like they were from kids than there had been the previous week.

But there was one piece of paper in the box that was different

from the others. It wasn't one of the slips I'd printed. It was pale green, and I knew that when I turned it over, I'd see a drawing of Santa Claus in one corner, and the message on it would be written in block capital letters.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twelve

I was afraid to look at the note, but I knew if I didn't I wouldn't stand a chance of getting any sleep that night. My mind would be too busy making up all the things the note might say. It was better to look and get it over with, even if it ended up upsetting me.

I gingerly reached out and flipped over the green slip of paper. As I'd expected, it had the Santa illustration on the corner, and at the top it said "The Naughty/Nice List." The word "Nice" had been marked through and "Naughty" was circled, the way it had been in the last note I got. The message was written in the familiar block capitals. Since it was written on the Santa memo pad instead of on one of my slips, I guessed it had been written ahead of time and dropped in the box. I hadn't noticed anyone dropping a note in without stopping to write it, but there had been times when I'd been distracted, like when I was talking to Wes or handing out newspapers while explaining the Secret Santa concept. Someone could have slipped it in while walking past without me noticing.

The note said, "Nice try, but I'm the real Secret Santa. I'm the one who knows all the secrets, including yours."

"Which one?" I muttered. I was pretty sure they meant Wes, but that was probably my least-damaging secret.

Speaking of that other secret, Jean appeared in the office. "Why are you still here? Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"Soon," I said. "There's not much point in trying before they turn off the music." I turned around to glance at the clock on the

wall behind me. "I've got about ten minutes."

"Did you get anything new on the bandit?"

"Just that our chief suspect was downtown when this robbery happened, so that clerk was wrong about who it was." I picked up the Secret Santa note and added, "And I got this."

She leaned over to read it. "Hmmpf. If that's a threat, it's a weak one," she said. "Are they trying to scare you into not helping people?"

"I get the feeling they're mad at me for something," I said. "In the last note, they talked about how I listened to the police department, so maybe there's a story they think I should have covered but didn't because Wes didn't want me to."

"Then they haven't been paying attention. You don't listen to the police. Your cop's always mad at you about that."

"I have held back information that was critical to an investigation. Like I didn't say that the county engineer's murder last month was staged to look like a suicide. And I didn't name the kid accused of the robberies since the police didn't have any evidence pointing to him. Good thing, too, since he's got an alibi for some of the robberies. For other stories, I've left out some details that might hurt people that aren't critical to the story. Maybe there's someone the Santa wishes I'd exposed. In general, though, I'm far more likely to cover something Wes tries to tell me isn't a big deal."

She looked at the note. "You know, the sideshow had a psychic who could touch an object and tell you things about its owner."

"That would come in handy. Do you know if it was a real gift or an act?"

"No idea."

"And we'd have to figure out who the descendants might be—and if they're willing to admit they have the gift." I knew Margarita's great-grandmother had been a fortune-teller in the sideshow, but it didn't seem like that was a real gift. Her grandmother sometimes served as the fortune-teller at local fairs

and carnivals, and it was pure hokum, “You’re about to experience a change” type of stuff. I hadn’t seen her handle objects as part of the act.

Jean disappeared, and I brought up the slate for my past month or so of issues to see what stories there might have been in which I left out information because Wes had asked me to. There weren’t many. As I’d said to Jean, I was far more likely to go the other way. That made me feel a lot better about public perception about our relationship. I flipped through the memo book on my desk to see if there was anything I’d taken notes about that hadn’t gone in the paper. There were a few, aside from the cases I’d mentioned to Jean. Most of them had eventually ended up in the newspaper, once the case was complete. I merely didn’t get it in the first issue after the event. Depending on when the incident happened, it might be a couple of weeks before it was printed in the paper, which might have made it look like a delay. There had been a man arrested after being accused of molesting his neighbor’s daughter, and I hadn’t printed that until the arrest was actually made. It was a serious enough accusation that I worried it would cause more trouble if it went public before the police acted. I got the first tip on a Friday, but the arrest didn’t happen until the following Thursday, after I went to press, so the story didn’t appear until a full week later. Maybe that was it.

But the arrest had been made, and I had nothing to do with any delay by the police. I looked through my notes to find the victim’s family’s name—which hadn’t gone in the paper. Neither parent was associated with the school, but the mother was a waitress at the diner. She’d pick up on a lot of information there, even if she didn’t have a mind-reading gift.

I pulled up the security footage from the front of the newspaper office and scrolled through it, but I didn’t see any slips that looked green instead of white going into the box. At night and with so many colored lights, I wasn’t sure the camera picked up on the difference between very pale green and white, so I couldn’t tell for

certain. There were a number of times when someone blocked the camera's view of the box. The video didn't tell me anything.

The music shut off outside, and the silence was both welcome and strange. I swept the slips back into the box and put it in the press room on my way to my apartment. I was tired enough that the lights didn't even bother me and I fell asleep quickly.

I went to the diner for breakfast Saturday morning. It was a gray day with the threat of drizzle, and the place was quieter than it usually was on a weekend. I noted that the mother from that case was working, but she didn't pay any particular attention to me—no glare or scowl, just a mildly flustered invitation to seat myself when I entered. I watched her work, and I didn't see anything about the way she interacted with people that suggested she knew any of their secrets. I also doubted she had the resources to give the gifts the Secret Santa had given. I couldn't rule her out entirely, but she really didn't seem like she was my best suspect.

I didn't know if everyone was tired after the previous night's festivities and whatever else was going on during the holiday season, but the buzz of conversation struck me as strangely muted for the number of people in the diner. Since it was in an old rail car, the space was narrow, with a fairly low ceiling, and there was a lot of metal. It was usually noisy from conversation, even when just a few people were there, but it was quiet this morning. It was as though people were avoiding saying anything out loud. Were they afraid of what the Secret Santa might pick up?

Because it was so quiet, anyone who listened intently was sure to hear anything that was said. I overheard two women talking in the booth behind me. Their conversation was surely meant to be private, but there was no way for me to avoid overhearing it.

"I found out why Dave's been so squirrely lately," one said.

"More than he usually is?" the other responded.

"Yeah, believe it or not. He's been paranoid and twitchy, like I'm always catching him doing something he shouldn't be doing, even though he's been there the whole time and obviously not

doing anything. Well, he came clean last night. He's been playing around with dating apps."

"Seriously? While dating you?"

"He swears it was basically like playing a game or looking at a catalog."

"That's not a demeaning way of looking at women at all," the friend said sarcastically.

"It wasn't even local. He was pretending he was in another city and looking at what kind of women were in that city. It was like he was building his fantasy life in some other place."

"Like with real estate listings, but with people?"

"Yeah. He even showed me, and then he deleted all the apps."

"And this was making him feel so guilty that he got weird around you?"

"Apparently, he was living in fear that the Secret Santa would know about it and tell me, but they wouldn't know the whole story and I'd think he was cheating. He wanted to tell me himself and explain it before I got a note."

"What kind of women was he looking at?"

"That's the weird thing. They were mostly clones of me, not the busty model type. It seems that I really am his fantasy woman. We just aren't in his fantasy place. We talked about whether we actually want to move. I don't think he's serious about being elsewhere. It's just something he does when he has a bad day at work and imagines himself far away. I showed him how to use real estate listings like that. All the dreaming about being somewhere else, but no actual people are involved, and the prices tend to be a good reality check."

"It is weird that when he wanted to be somewhere else, the first thing he did was find out what women were available there."

"Yeah, we're still working through that."

I was glad my back was to them because I had a hard time keeping a straight face during that conversation. I'd spent my fair share of time on real estate websites, looking at where I might live

if I got my dream job at one of the big papers. Unfortunately, the salaries at those papers wouldn't have supported any of the dream homes in those cities. It occurred to me that I hadn't done any real estate dreaming since I took the job in Stirling Mills. Either I was content where I was or I didn't have the kind of down time that led to killing time online.

When I stopped by the cash register to pay on my way out, I had to wait behind a man who was arguing with the cashier and trying to hand her money. "No, I'm paying for a couple of weeks ago," he said. "I realized I forgot my wallet, and I just slipped out without paying. I was planning to come back and pay when I had my wallet, but I never got around to it even though I was always thinking about it. I figured if no one had noticed, maybe there was no harm, but what if someone told you about it? So now I want to make up for it."

She frowned. "Okay. Do you remember who your waitress was?"

"Dolores. There's a tip for her in there, too."

She took the money and set it aside. "I'll make sure she gets it," she said.

The man thanked her and left, looking as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"That's the third one like that this week," the cashier said when I stepped up to the register.

"Do you have that many people skip out on tickets?"

"No. That's what makes it so weird. It's like everyone who walked on a ticket in the last few years has suddenly decided to come clean. Must be Christmas."

"Must be," I agreed, though I suspected what I was seeing was the Secret Santa effect. People were so afraid of their secret sins being exposed that they wanted to get ahead of the Santa and come clean on their own in a way that would allow them to manage the message.

When I ran errands after breakfast, I noticed that there seemed

to be more tension than usual at the stores, and it wasn't just the sort of thing you might expect from the holiday crunch. People eyed each other with suspicion but avoided eye contact. It reminded me of earlier in the year, when there had been a string of burglaries and everyone seemed to suspect everyone else. Now they were probably wondering if those other people might be the Secret Santa or if they had secrets—or possibly if they'd already been told secrets.

If the Santa was a mind reader, I figured people were safe in a crowded store because it would be impossible to know whose secrets they were hearing. As far as I could tell, the Santa had so far been very particular about who the secret was about, with no vague “someone is cheating” types of warnings.

I couldn't help but wonder how the growing paranoid vibe would affect the downtown holiday events. Saturday night was one of the big nights, with extra activities. Instead of the piped-in music in some places there would be strolling carolers. Hay rides and carriage rides would offer tours of the downtown lights and the displays in the historic neighborhood close to downtown. Local choirs and other performing groups would be doing shows at the park's gazebo, and the theater was hosting the local production of *A Christmas Carol*. There was a good chance many of the people attending would be tourists from out of town. If the tourists had picked up on the uncomfortable vibe the previous weekend, they were bound to be turned off completely this week.

It seemed Jordan had also worried about that, because when I went to the park that afternoon, he not only had the machine blowing snow, but there was snow piled in drifts around the park, making it look like there had been a very localized snowstorm that day. “What do you think?” he asked when I went over to where he was tinkering with one of the machines.

“How did you get all this?” I asked.

“There's fake snow that won't melt. You use it along with the machines that make the falling snow. It's the same technology they

use in Hollywood. This is mostly what you see in all those TV Christmas movies. You'll notice that the leaves on the trees are usually green, but there's snow on the ground and blowing around in the sky."

"Oh, I'll have to look for that if I ever watch one of those movies." Of course, I'd noticed that effect. I sometimes played a drinking game spotting the evidence that the movies were filmed in the summer. I just hadn't known how they made the realistic-looking snow during the summer.

The performances in the park began in the afternoon, so people began arriving downtown long before the lights came on. I watched the hay wagon, pulled by a tractor, go by a few times before I decided it was time to return to the office to put out my Secret Santa box. There were already people walking up and down the street, shopping and going to restaurants. A group in Victorian attire arrived at the nearest street corner and began singing carols.

"This is a lot like it was downtown in my day," Jean said. She'd passed through the door and hovered near me, up against the building. "Not the carolers, but people out shopping. The sidewalks were full. The department store was in that building." She pointed down the street, across from Margarita's restaurant.

I got my phone out of my pocket and pretended to be on a call so I could talk to Jean without looking to most people like I was talking to thin air. "That's where Jordan's co-working space is. He's got an office upstairs, and his coffee shop is also in that building."

"Is there even anything to buy downtown these days?"

"There are art galleries, and there are a few pop-up shops selling Christmas things."

"Pop-up shop?"

"A temporary store. It'll only be here during the holiday season because people don't generally buy Christmas ornaments the rest of the year."

"What this downtown needs is things people want to buy all the time."

“Most of those things are sold at the big stores outside downtown, and cheaper than they could be sold in a small shop here. But once more people start living down here, there may be more shops.”

“I guess it is a bit better than it was just before I died. Almost everything but the newspaper office was all boarded up then. We were the last holdout, and I was probably the only person still living downtown.”

Some people approached, and I pretended to end my call before greeting them and answering their questions about the Secret Santa program. Jean went back and forth from the sidewalk to the office. I wondered if the Sweet Tooth Bandit was likely to strike again that night while all the excitement was downtown. If he did, I didn't stand a chance of driving anywhere.

When the lights came on at dusk, the music didn't come with them because the carolers were back on the nearest corner. Only when they moved on to another block did the music begin playing. I assumed the carolers were on a set schedule and route and the appropriate speakers were turned off to match that.

I'd collected a number of Santa wishes, so I put everything inside, locked up, and headed down to the park to catch some of the entertainment. One of the big church choirs was singing as I arrived. The light show continued, even without the music it was synchronized to. It didn't quite match the choir's music, and that was most obvious when the lights were blinking furiously in a part of the show that usually went with “Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree” while the choir sang a slow piece with a lot of complicated harmonies.

As far as I could tell, the paranoid vibe I'd noticed earlier in the day wasn't evident here. I didn't know if that was because there were so many tourists in the mix or because it was hard to be in a bad mood while surrounded by so much Christmas cheer. Then again, those who were feeling truly paranoid might not have come out to be among the crowds.

“Erin Richards?” a voice near me called out. A cluster of teen girls turned, and I followed their gaze to see that the speaker was an earnest, clean-cut boy wearing a letter jacket.

Nudged by the other girls, one girl in the group stepped forward. “That’s me.”

He nodded. “That’s what I thought. I’ve seen you around. You’re in band, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“I play in concert season, but since I’m on the football team, I don’t march.”

“I know.”

“Oh, right. Anyway, I, uh, understand that you kind of like me.”

I felt for the girl. She whirled on her friends and said, “Who told?” Amid a flurry of giggles, they all denied it.

Just when Erin must have been wishing for a convenient sinkhole to appear and swallow her, the boy said, “It’s cool. I don’t really know you, but I think maybe I’d like to. Want to go get some cocoa, or something, and talk?”

She glanced back at her friends, who got behind her and nudged her forward. “Um, okay, I guess,” she said. She and the boy walked off.

Her friends high-fived each other. “Finally! I thought that crush would stay from afar forever,” one said.

“So you did tell him?” the other asked.

“No. You mean you didn’t?”

“No. So how did he find out?”

“She can be pretty obvious.”

“But he didn’t seem to be sure she was Erin. He knew her name but wasn’t sure about who she was.”

“It must have been the Secret Santa.”

I wasn’t sure how I’d classify that particular secret. Erin probably would have preferred that her crush not be notified about her feelings, and I suspected she’d wanted the earth to swallow her whole when the boy approached her, but now that it had worked

out okay, maybe she was glad, after all. I'd been in her shoes, and I didn't think the objects of my crushes ever had any idea I existed because I'd never had the nerve to do anything about them. Someone else cluing them in might have made things work out differently—but only if the guys weren't horrified. Erin was lucky that this guy seemed to be pretty nice, and he was willing to give her a shot.

A woman rushed past me, calling out, "Brian! Brian!" A man stopped and turned, and she said, "I wanted to tell you before you heard it somewhere else. I think I'm pregnant."

He looked like she'd kicked him in the stomach. "Really? Mine?"

"Who else, you idiot?" She said it somewhat fondly, but with some room for her to have meant it sincerely.

"Of course, sorry."

"Well, what do you have to say?"

"It's good? Yes, it's good. Look, I'm sorry. I was a jerk. Can we give things another try?"

"You really want to?"

"I missed you. I was going to call you. It was a stupid fight and I was being stubborn."

She smiled and threw her arms around him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. I got a lump in my throat. That appeared to be another case of people preemptively acting on the fear of the Secret Santa. How many people were confessing to things before the Santa could reveal them? Maybe there were some positives beyond the gifts. Still, it wasn't the Santa's business to get involved like that. I wondered what the Santa would think about having their secrets spread around town, even if it was for their own good. I'd said I wasn't going to reveal the Santa's identity in the newspaper, but now I wondered about that.

Of course, I'd have to figure out who it was, first, and I was starting to get an idea.

Chapter Thirteen

I needed to set a trap for the Santa and catch him responding, and I'd already seen that the security camera didn't help. Maybe I could put Jean on the job of watching the box, and then she could alert me when someone put in a note on the green stationery. She wouldn't be blocked the way the camera could be, and since no one would know she was there, they couldn't make a point of avoiding her the way someone who'd spotted the camera could avoid it. The trick would be finding something that would make the Santa want to leave me another message. He really didn't seem to like me being close to Wes, so looking like I was tight with him might set the Santa off. Margarita had suggested kissing him in public, but it didn't seem right to use him that way without him being in on it, and bringing him in on it would require revealing the notes, which would probably spark an uncomfortable discussion. I'd have to commit to either moving forward with a relationship or definitively back away and explain my reasons why. Our current undefined status was sometimes frustrating, but it was easy, and it seemed to be working.

"You really can't get enough of this stuff, can you?" Wes's voice right behind me made me jump guiltily. It was as though I'd conjured him out of thin air with my thoughts.

"You're here, too," I pointed out as I turned to face him and hoped my mental shields were functioning properly. I did *not* want him to know what I'd just been thinking.

"I'm working."

"So am I. This is a news event about a major local economic and cultural initiative."

"Haven't you already covered it in exhaustive detail? How much can you write about a bunch of lights?"

"There's always something new." I glanced around at the crowds in the park. "And it looks like it's going well. It'll be interesting to see what it does for sales tax revenues. How are things looking from your end? Any incidents of note?"

"It's been pretty calm. Oddly, people seem to be talking rather than fighting."

"Yeah, there have been a lot of confessions being made tonight, people taking the initiative to tell what's on their mind before the Santa reveals it."

"That's one way to deal with blackmail. Get out ahead of it so that the secret no longer has any value."

"Is it blackmail, though? I haven't heard of any demands or threats." Well, except maybe for the notes that had been aimed at me. "The notes have just told people things, and the people whose secrets have been told were surprised that it came out, so it doesn't sound like they got any kind of blackmail demand."

"True. Which is why the police haven't been involved yet."

"Any progress on the bandit?"

He shook his head. "Nope. He wears a mask and gloves, so the security footage doesn't tell us anything and he's not leaving prints. He must park somewhere else because there's no car visible on the video. His clothes are all generic stuff you can buy anywhere, and there's nothing distinguishing about them. No one recognizes his jacket or shoes. The only lead we had was Meg swearing she knew who it was, but her suspect has been publicly visible during a couple of the robberies. That's where we stand—and you can print that, but you'd probably better hold off on the mention of a suspect who's been ruled out."

"Trust me, I don't want to be sued."

“It would be handy if the Santa would tip me off about who the robber is. As much as they seem to know about what’s going on in the town, you’d think they’d know who’s getting their kicks by terrorizing kids who work at fast-food places and convenience stores. Not that I could use that kind of tip to make an arrest, but it might give me someone to keep an eye on.”

“I’ve wondered if the Santa and the bandit might be working together. That string of robberies happened around the same time that the Santa was leaving notes. Maybe the robberies were a diversion so no cops would notice the break-ins. Both of them seem to be lashing out about something. Both seem to be a way to feel more powerful.”

“Then if they’re working together, I can’t count on the Santa solving the case for me. At least they don’t seem to be telling anyone anything about me.”

That was my cue to say something. Maybe I should do like the other people I’d heard and share my own secret. That might suffice for my plan to make the Santa think I was conspiring with Wes, though it might not be as fun as the kissing idea. The kind of conversation this would require would look awfully intimate. I could kill two birds with one stone. “Well, actually,” I started. My palms grew sweaty, and I felt sick at my stomach. This was the easy way out, so why was it so difficult?

“What, Lex?”

“I’ve had a note or two that mention you. But it’s not really secrets. At least not from your end. But I don’t think we should talk about it here.”

“You’ve had notes about me?” He sounded truly alarmed.

I gulped, regretting I’d said anything. Unfortunately, it was too late to back down now, and it was too late to just kiss him and hope the Santa was watching. “Kind of.”

“About what? I didn’t think I had any secrets. Well, except for . . .” He tapped his forehead.

“Like I said, I don’t think we should talk about it here.”

He glanced at his watch. "I've got a break due soon, but I only have fifteen minutes. Your office?"

People would see him entering, and we'd be in view while we sat in there, which made it more likely that the Santa would notice us and think we were conspiring about something, letting our relationship affect our jobs. "Yeah, my office," I said.

"Okay, see you in a bit."

What had I done? But I figured if teenage kids could own up to what was in the notes they'd received, I could face Wes. I remembered what Ruthie had told me about just talking to Wes. We were never going to get anywhere while dancing around issues. We were adults, and we could use our words. Words were my business.

So why did I have no idea what I should say?

I went back to the office and put on a kettle. He might like some of that spicy herbal tea. While the electric kettle boiled, I straightened my desk and got out the notes that concerned Wes. I poured hot water over tea bags in a teapot so I wouldn't have to make tea after he arrived, since I only had fifteen minutes with him. Then I watched people walking up and down the sidewalk while I waited. When I noticed him approaching, I got up and unlocked the door, then re-locked it after he entered. "People keep thinking this is either some kind of journalism museum or a shop and come on in if I don't lock the door," I said, babbling with nervousness. "Maybe next year I should have an open house and invite people in to learn about the newspaper, but not now. How about some tea? I just made some of the herbal kind you like."

"Sure," he said, sitting in the chair beside my desk. While I poured the tea, he looked out the window. "Wow, that music is still pretty loud, even in here," he said. "You never get away from it, do you?"

I handed him a mug and poured myself a mug. "It's not too bad. Weekends are worst because it stays on longer. At least it's music I like—good versions of the songs. The problem is that

they're all in the same order, so I'm hearing it in a loop and I'm starting to anticipate the song that comes next. I was in a store this morning and when one of the songs from the loop played on the sound system, I caught myself mentally singing the next song, then was surprised when something else came on."

"I've noticed the same thing from doing foot patrols so much during all this. I know what song comes next."

"I talked to Jordan about mixing it up, maybe putting it on shuffle, but since the light show in the park is keyed to the music, he can't mix it up. He said he'd look into some other ways of doing things for next year, either some more complicated programming or maybe using different music for the display at the park with a buffer zone so they don't overlap each other. At least I can escape. I can go in a different room, and I can theoretically drive away—if I can fight the traffic. You're stuck here while you're working."

"I console myself with thoughts of how much overtime I'm racking up. I may take a vacation after the holidays. But we're not here to talk about music, and I don't have a lot of time. What notes did you get about me?"

I steeled myself and pushed the notes across my desk to him. "The first one is from the first time I put up the Secret Santa box, and then they left this other one last night. I was hoping to catch them leaving it on the security camera, but it doesn't seem to have worked." At that moment, the sound system began playing a sultry version of "Let it Snow." That made this moment feel even more awkward, adding a context to it that I didn't necessarily want.

"Is this why you've been weird around me?" he asked after reading them. "I've felt kind of like you were avoiding me."

"In part." And now it was confession time. I'd made a decision about how to progress, and it was time to get that out in the open. I glanced out the window and noticed people staring at us as they passed. Now I knew how fish in an aquarium felt. Turning back to Wes, I took a deep breath and said, "But even before the notes I've been concerned about looking like there's a conflict of interest if

we get too close. We talked after Halloween like maybe we were going somewhere with whatever is happening between us, and then I guess we were both busy so it didn't happen right away, and that gave me time to think. Plus Jean had her say, and I figured it was best not to push it. And now this."

"Since when do you ever do what I say?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "The Secret Santa may be frighteningly accurate about a lot of things, but they really missed the mark here."

"I sometimes go along with what you tell me when what you say makes sense, though in those cases I was going to do it anyway, so it's not as though I'm doing it because you told me to. You laid out the rules for when something you tell me is or isn't for publication, but I do have my own set of ethics, and I know when I can or can't print something. I don't disagree with you too often. But it looks like at least one person in town thinks I'm going by what you tell me to do rather than by my own judgment, and that concerns me, since I don't really have a reputation established here yet. People don't know that I've got my own code of ethics. Like you said, even the Secret Santa doesn't seem to know me. And I don't want anyone to think that I have any influence on you, either, or that you're giving me inside information."

The music stopped, and the next song didn't come on. He gave a big sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness. I wasn't ready to face 'The Little Drummer Boy.'"

"This may be worse," I warned, glancing toward the window. Sure enough, the carolers had stopped right in front of the newspaper office, which meant a crowd began to gather. It was no longer just people glancing inside as they passed. They were standing there, staring at the carolers and past them at us. Some people held up phones, recording the moment. This conversation was going to be in the background of someone's video. I hoped the sound didn't carry or was drowned out by the music.

"So, that's what's going on. I'm glad you told me," Wes said. "I was starting to feel like you got scared and backed off."

I forced my attention back to him, trying to ignore the four-part harmony of “Winter Wonderland” that was going on right outside the window. “Well, actually, maybe.”

“So you’re not interested?”

“No. I mean yes. Okay, this isn’t really a yes-or-no question. I was having concerns even before the notes. Maybe the timing is bad. I need to get a little more established in the town before I get involved with someone I have to deal with a lot for work. I’m still getting used to life in a small town where people don’t move on every few years.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I get that. It makes sense. I’ve got to admit, I’ve been a little worried about what the chief would say. He’s made a few remarks already, nothing official, but with strong implications. I don’t want to look like there’s a conflict of interest, especially as often as you get involved in cases.”

“That’s why you didn’t really follow up after Halloween?”

“That and I’ve been pretty busy. Even if we wanted to date, when would we have managed since then?”

“True,” I said with a chuckle. “We did go get pie that one time. That was fun.”

“It was.”

“So, we’re both on the same page here? Friends, maybe something more later, but give it time for people to get used to us?”

“Yeah. Sounds good. I still want to figure out who this Santa is. I don’t like them making implied threats.”

“I have a plan. I’m trying to draw the Santa out, encourage them to leave me another note, and then I can get Jean to keep an eye out and alert me.”

He grinned. “So, that’s what this was, a way for us to look like we’re being nice and cozy, maybe even conspiring on something, so you can rile up the Secret Santa.”

“Well, kind of. But it was a conversation we needed to have, and I’m glad I got it off my chest.”

“Me, too. Let me know if it works.” He set down his mug on my desk and stood. “Now I’d better get back on patrol.”

“You aren’t late from your break, are you?” I asked as I got out of my own chair.

“As soon as I step out that door, I’m back on duty, so I’m good.”

I walked him to the door and unlocked it. As I opened it, I said, “Thank you for coming in, officer. I’ll be doing a follow-up story this week.” I was sure I wasn’t fooling anyone. Then again, that was the point. It would have defeated the purpose of the exercise if anyone had actually been able to overhear our conversation over the sound of the carolers.

“Thanks for the tea and the chance to sit down for a moment,” he said, giving me a salute before heading off down the sidewalk..

I locked the door after he left and put the mugs and teapot on a tray to take up to my kitchen to wash them. My eyes stung, and I blinked away tears before they could start falling. The last thing I wanted was for the people watching the carolers outside the window to see me crying after I talked to Wes. That would ruin my plan.

I didn’t know why I was upset. The conversation had gone better than I could have hoped, and I got what I wanted. Maybe I just wanted him to have put up more of a fight. It seemed my feelings for him were stronger than his for me, which meant that getting involved with him would be a bad idea. If it didn’t work out or we drifted apart, I’d still have to see him around town and even work with him while I still had feelings. That would be torture. It was better to cut it off before I got in too deep.

“I know that was tough, but you needed to do it,” Jean said, appearing near my desk.

“Don’t tell me you were eavesdropping the whole time,” I said, keeping my back to the windows so the people outside wouldn’t see me talking to thin air.

“I bowed out once I realized what was going on.”

“Then you don’t know all of what was going on. It was also part

of a plan, and for that I need your help.” I explained the plan to her. “Are you in?”

“Take an active role in an investigation? You bet!”

“Then I’m going to put the box out on the sidewalk. Keep an eye on it and alert me the moment you see someone putting in something that’s not on a white slip of paper, especially if they don’t stop to write it out there.”

I set up the Secret Santa box in the doorway again and stood nearby so it didn’t look too much like I was monitoring the box. Jean hovered over it, and I wondered what the passers-by on the sidewalk would think if they knew there was a ghost watching them.

When the foot traffic slowed, I waited a little longer. Jean hadn’t alerted me to anything, and I didn’t want to miss the Santa. Finally, I gave up and took everything inside when the music cut off. I set the box on my desk, took off the lid, and dug around inside, looking for one of those green slips of paper, just in case the Santa had managed to sneak past Jean. “Is there anything?” Jean asked. “I didn’t see anyone, but they’ve got to be pretty stealthy if they’re sneaking into people’s houses without being noticed.”

“I don’t see anything. At least, nothing obvious. If they left a note, it’s not on their usual paper. I’ll have to go through the whole box.” I yawned. “But that will have to wait until tomorrow. Not that it will do any good then. The point was to catch them.”

“Maybe they’ll try sneaking in tonight. That’s how they do it with other people.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll stick around and keep an eye out, just in case. I wonder if they’d hit the office or the apartment.”

“The office would be a safer way to leave a note without risk of being caught, but if the point is to show me how close they can get, they’d go to the apartment.”

“I’m fairly aware of the whole building, like it’s an extension of my body. They won’t get past me.”

“Get me the moment you notice something.”

“Of course.”

“And don’t do anything to scare them, or they might run away.”

“I know how to haunt,” she said, sounding offended.

I locked the office and set the alarm before heading upstairs. For a moment, I considered leaving a door unlocked and the alarm off so the Santa would be able to walk into my trap, but the Santa wasn’t the only person who might try to get in the office, and we had expensive equipment in there. The Santa had made it past other people’s locks, and Jean would be able to see them even if they were just trying to get in. She might not be able to identify them, since they were probably from after her time, but her description might help. If they’d made it past other people’s security systems, I couldn’t count on them showing up on video. They’d eluded my camera so far.

I took the mugs and teapot up to my apartment to wash, then got ready for bed, though I doubted I’d get much sleep. I’d have been tempted to lurk with Jean for a stakeout, but the Santa might notice me. It was better that I at least appear to be in bed asleep.

I lay gazing at the soft glow of colored lights on my bedroom walls and must have drifted off along the way because I jerked awake in the darkness sometime later to find a ghost hovering over me and shouting, “They’re here!”

Chapter Fourteen

I was used to Jean, and I'd told her to alert me if something happened, but it was still the stuff of nightmares to wake in the night to a spectral figure hovering over me and yelling at me. As a result, it took me a moment to get over the shock enough to realize what she was saying.

"The Santa?" I said. "I didn't hear the alarm, and I know I set it."

"The alarm didn't go off. Hurry and get downstairs, and you'll catch her."

"Her?" I asked, already sliding out of bed and shoving my feet into slippers. I grabbed a flashlight that I kept handy in case of power outages and used it to make my way down the stairs into the press room. I didn't want to startle the intruder into fleeing by turning on the overhead lights.

In the press room, I paused to peer through the little window on the door into the office. Jean had gone straight through the bedroom floor to the office and was circling the room like she was on guard. A woman was in there, bent over my desk. Another woman—small and slightly built—stood in the open front doorway, on her toes so that she reached up to touch the alarm sensor. I eased the press room door open and shouted, "Hold it right there!" I held the flashlight up as though it was a gun, with the light off. I hoped that in the darkness it might fool them so they didn't do anything to me.

The one at my desk squeaked and whirled, then she froze, and I heard a sharp intake of breath, then silence, as though she was holding her breath. “Sit!” I ordered, gesturing with the flashlight.

“You see me?” she asked.

“Yes. Of course I see you,” I said. “Now, sit.” She sat in my desk chair. I turned to the girl at the door. “You, too. Come in here.”

“If I leave the door, the alarm will go off,” she said.

I stepped over to the keypad, which was next to the press room door, and punched in the code to disarm the alarm. “Now, come inside and sit.” She obeyed and went to the side chair, where Wes usually sat. I thought about turning on a light, but I didn’t want to draw attention from outside. Plus, my snowflake pajamas weren’t very intimidating, and there was no telling what my hair looked like.

“You’re not going to call the police, are you?” The one who’d been at the door asked.

“You should,” Jean urged. “You caught them red-handed.”

I ignored her. “That depends on what you have to say.” I turned on my flashlight to get a good look at them. They shielded their eyes from the light and turned away, but I still recognized them as the two girls who’d been sitting with Meg at the pep rally, the mousy one and the blue-haired one. The blue-haired girl was the one who’d been at my desk, leaving a note, from the looks of it.

“Let me guess, you’re the Secret Santa. And now I think I know how you’ve been doing it. It’s a team effort.” Things were clicking into place for me, clues that should have added up before now. “You’re the one no one notices,” I said to the blue-haired one. That explained the blue hair. I’d recently met a woman who had the same gift/curse, and she’d dyed her hair all kinds of colors in an attempt to stand out, but no one noticed. “You can sneak up on people and slide notes into their pockets without them realizing you were ever there. And you can approach houses and sneak around without worrying about being caught.”

“I sometimes even left notes while people were still up and

moving around the houses,” she said. “No one even saw me.”

“And you,” I said to the other one, “have the electrical gift, so you can disrupt security systems. But how do you get through locked doors?”

“I’m a pretty good pickpocket,” the blue-haired one said with a shrug. “No one notices me, and I can swipe their keys. It’s amazing how many people don’t use the interior deadbolts overnight. Then I leave the keys in their houses when I go. They just think they misplaced them when they find them in the house.” She held up a key. “Your assistant must have dropped this tonight.”

I snatched the key from her hand. “That explains how you leave the notes and the gifts. Then there’s how you get the information.” The final piece clicked into place. Meg was tall and had reddish hair, and she’d insisted she knew who the bandit was, even though there was no obvious evidence, yet she couldn’t recognize him from a security video. “Where’s Meg?” I asked. “Did she not come along with you?”

“She’s on lookout,” the electric girl said.

“So she’s the mind reader,” I said. If she was related to Wes and knew he knew about her gift, no wonder she was angry that he hadn’t believed her.

“Yeah,” the blue-haired one said. “She always knows if someone’s coming because they think about having heard something. But I don’t get why she didn’t hear you.”

“I’m special that way,” I said.

The door opened and Meg stepped through. “You guys okay?” she asked.

“She caught us,” the blue-haired one said.

“Yeah, I know, I heard you thinking it,” Meg said.

“Why didn’t you go for help?” the electric girl asked.

“From who?” Meg asked with a shrug. “It’s not like I could call the cops to report that you were possibly in danger because someone caught you breaking in.”

“Oh, right,” her friend said.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "I just want some answers. I now know how you've been doing it. But why?"

Meg heaved a sigh. "Why not? There are a lot of things in this town that need to be said, but everyone keeps secrets."

"You aren't going to coddle them, are you?" Jean demanded.

Being around others meant I had an excuse not to answer her. "Let's go upstairs where we can talk without being on show to Main Street," I said. I locked the front door, then herded them through the press room and up to my apartment, where I told them to have a seat and went to boil water to make cocoa. "You are coddling them," Jean observed as I got out the cocoa mix and some mugs.

While I waited for the water to boil, I went back out to the living room and said, "I know Meg. Who are you two?"

"I'm Carrie," the blue-haired one said.

"And I'm Michelle," the electric girl said.

"I'll get your last names later," I said. "But that'll do for now. I'm Lexie."

"Are you going to call the police?" Michelle asked, her eyes wide with terror.

"Or write about us in the newspaper?" Carrie asked.

"That depends." I returned to the kitchen to mix up the cocoa and brought them mugs. When I took a seat facing them, I said, "I can't be expected to have a conversation in the middle of the night without something to fortify me." After I'd taken a sip of cocoa and let the sweet warmth hit my system, I said, "So, was it the bandit who set you off? You knew who it was, but no one would believe you, so you went after Cliff by telling the guys on the football team who started the rumor about them."

"Something like that," Meg said.

"But you knew so much other stuff about people, so you shared a few more secrets."

"It's frustrating how much people get away with," Meg said, her hands clasped around her mug. "People were always thinking

about things when they came in to pay for gas or shop at the store, so I knew so much. I knew who was on his way to meet up with his mistress, who was gloating to himself about getting away with something. And it was worse when there was a victim, someone who was suffering because of that person's secret. Like that guy who was thinking about the woman he was going to let go the next day. She was out there, totally unaware that her life was about to be messed up. She deserved to know."

"And so we came up with a plan to let her know," Carrie said. "We could all do weird things, so if we worked together, we could pull it off."

"It did help her," I said. "I heard her talking about it. That advance warning allowed her to get some files off her laptop so that she had samples of her work and her résumé, and she was able to brace herself when her boss called her in to his office at work."

Carrie turned to the others. "See, that worked out."

"Isabella's mother came in to pay for gas—she paid cash, so she had to come inside, and she prepaid only five dollars," Meg said. "All she could think about was how she was going to tell Isabella that she couldn't take part in the Christmas Queen contest because she couldn't buy a dress."

"She's about the same size as me," Carrie said. "And I had a dress that I was planning to wear to homecoming. I saw it on sale and couldn't resist, just in case. But nobody asked me because people don't remember I exist, so I never got to wear it. I figured Isabella might as well have it, so we left it for her."

"And then you helped sway the election for her," I said.

"Isabella's nice," Meg said, shrugging. "I've never heard anything really awful from her. The others, though." She shuddered.

"That was fun," Carrie said. "We hit a lot of likely voters during the game, and then I got to run around the people in the park that night, slipping notes into people's pockets."

"And you knew Josie needed gas," I said.

"I get a few perks at work, so I had some extra gift cards," Meg said. "She was another one who pre-paid just a few dollars, so she came inside and was thinking about how worried she was about having enough gas for finals. They were more spread out than her usual classes were, so she had to make more trips and miss more work."

"And I went to the restaurant to put it in her pocket," Carrie said. "So you see, we were doing a public service."

"You also caused a lot of pain. Not everyone wanted to know these things you revealed to them."

"But they needed to know!" Meg insisted. "And they couldn't know whether or not they wanted to know, since they didn't know anything to begin with."

"What message were you leaving for me tonight?"

Carrie put her cocoa on the coffee table and reached into her jacket pocket, took out a folded piece of paper, and handed it to me. It was like the other Secret Santa notes, on the same stationery, and written in the same block letters. "You rotated writing each letter, didn't you?" I said.

"We figured it was a good way to disguise our handwriting," Michelle said.

"You're cozy with the police," the note said. "No wonder you're sitting on a story for him. Can either of you be trusted?"

"You're mad at me because I wouldn't run a story about Cliff Raglan being the Sweet Tooth Bandit?" I asked.

"Nobody will listen to me!" Meg cried out. "Wes should know what it's like."

"Your cousin?" I guessed.

"My mom's cousin, which I think makes him some kind of cousin to me, like once removed, or something like that."

"You don't think he ever gets frustrated from knowing that someone committed a crime, but not being able to arrest them for it? He has to find evidence in order to make an arrest. Otherwise, he's the one who gets in trouble. And that's why I couldn't write a

story about Cliff being the bandit. If the police don't have enough evidence to be able to arrest him, then he could sue the newspaper for libel. I'd have to be able to prove it was true in order to defend myself and the paper. If I quoted you as saying it, he could sue you. From what I've heard about his father, he has hot and cold running lawyers built in to his business, so he definitely would have sued. Would you have liked that?"

"Oh," she said, her gaze going to her mug. "I hadn't thought about that. But if the cops knew he was the one, couldn't they have followed him to catch him in the act?"

"I don't think any of us would want to live in a town where the police could follow us around and watch all our movements based on an accusation with no evidence behind it. It didn't help matters when you couldn't identify the bandit from the videos."

"I don't look at people. I hear them in my head. A video doesn't do any good."

"Are you even sure you were right? I was looking right at him when a call about the bandit came over the scanner, and he had a solid alibi for another case."

"Really?" Meg said. "But how? I *know* it was him. He actually thought his name when he was in my store. He thought, 'She'll never guess Cliff Raglan would do this.'" She shook her head. "And we used to be such good friends. I don't know what happened to him."

"Money," Carrie said. "Money happened to him. They say power corrupts, but I think money is even worse for people."

"I don't know why he'd want to hurt me like that, though," Meg said, her voice going a little hoarse, like she was on the verge of tears. She drank a long gulp of cocoa.

"Did he know about your gift?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He wouldn't have thought those things about me after he got rich if he'd known." Her voice had a bitter edge. "And then he acted like he was the victim when I didn't want to be his friend anymore."

If he saw himself as the wounded party when the friendship ended, it might explain why he'd targeted her—if it was him. “Could it have been someone else trying to use your gift against you and him?” I asked, musing aloud. “They could have come in thinking something to mislead you, while it wasn't really Cliff. Does anyone know about your gift?”

“Probably someone does,” Meg said, sounding a little more composed, like she'd battled her emotions and won. “This is Stirling Mills. Someone who's from one of the sideshow families might know what families can do what. There's bound to be someone who knows or who's figured it out. But Cliff's not from an old local family. His dad moved here when he was young.”

“Maybe he hired someone to do it,” Carrie suggested. “That person could have been thinking about how Cliff was behind it.”

“Maybe,” Meg said, frowning. “But it felt like him. I may not hear actual voices in my head, but there are things that I feel that tell me who a person is. In a crowd, I might not be able to pick out the source of thoughts if I don't know the people, but when I do, I can be pretty accurate about who's thinking what, and I know Cliff really well.”

I wondered if it worked that way for Wes, but I couldn't think of a way to ask him without revealing that I knew about Meg. “What about the last two robberies?” I asked Meg. “What did you pick up on then?”

“He didn't hit my store then.”

That was interesting, and possibly suspicious. Was it meant as a red herring, in case Meg had identified the robber?

“You're not calling the police about us?” Michelle asked, derailing my train of thought before it could reach the station.

“For what?” I asked.

“We did break in. And we broke into all those other places.”

“No one has filed a police report about any of the other break-ins.”

“Really?” Carrie said. “Awesome.”

“And since you didn’t take anything or cause any damage, I don’t see any reason to call the police about you breaking in here,” I said.

“What about the newspaper?” Meg asked. “Are you going to write a story about us and what we’ve been doing?”

I had to give that a moment’s thought. People would definitely be interested in the identity of the Secret Santa, and I’d be a hero to some of them for catching the culprits. But I’d be a villain to others, and the fact that they were kids complicated matters. “I think half the town wouldn’t believe it if I told the truth about how you were doing it,” I said at last. “And I’m not sure how to explain it without getting into the stuff most people wouldn’t believe. However, you’ve got to stop.” But even that probably wouldn’t be enough to stop the damage. People would still be paranoid that their secrets might come out. “Maybe I can print a statement from the Secret Santa, saying you’re done sharing your naughty list with the world and you’re going back to the North Pole to get ready for Christmas. But you’d have to stop playing Secret Santa.”

“What if I learn about someone who needs something?” Meg asked.

“You can tell me. I can get in touch with people who may be able to help. We’ve had a great response to our own Secret Santa project in the newspaper.”

“What should I do if I learn something someone needs to know, like they’re in danger? Or like that lady who was going to lose her job? I can’t just tell them because they probably won’t believe me. For some weird reason, people were willing to believe the anonymous notes when they won’t believe someone who just tells them.”

“No breaking in,” I said. “Notes in pockets, maybe. Or under windshield wipers, or something like that. But no breaking the law to deliver them. I suspect people will be a lot less accepting of knowing someone was in their homes when it’s not Christmas, so they may start calling the police. I might have to tell what I know

then. And it has to be a real problem they can do something about where they'd be in trouble if they didn't know."

"Okay," Meg said, nodding. "That works for me." She turned to the others. "What about you guys?"

"You're the one who was going to explode from knowing all that stuff and not being able to do anything," Carrie said. "We'll be fine if you're okay."

"It would be a relief to stop breaking into places," Michelle said. "Though I guess you won't need me anymore if you don't need to bypass security systems." She bowed her head, letting her hair fall to curtain her face, and her shoulders slumped.

I waited for one of the other two to say something about needing her, about still being her friend, but they didn't. "Have you three been friends a long time?" I asked, hoping to prod them into reassuring her.

"We aren't really friends," Carrie said. "We just sit together at lunch since there's not enough room to each have our own table."

"I pretty much hate people," Meg said. "I know too much about what they're like inside." I could imagine what it must be like to be a mind-reading girl in a high school. She'd need brain bleach on a daily basis.

"And I basically don't exist," Carrie said. "I used to think it was fun to sit with the popular kids and see if they noticed me, but then it got depressing when they didn't notice or care and I was essentially sitting by myself, surrounded by people who were friends with each other."

"I might as well not exist," Michelle said. "I don't have a phone. I'm not on Instagram or Tik Tok or anything like that, which means I don't know what's going on in school and I never get invited to anything. People's devices tend to act up when I'm around. It's easier to just avoid people so they don't figure out it's because of me."

"So, we all gravitated toward the table by the trash cans where no one sits," Meg said. "I didn't mind them being near. Carrie's

thoughts don't really sink into my head."

"It seems the 'don't notice me' thing works on the psychic level, too," Carrie said. "I have to try to be heard."

"And it's like there's static around Michelle," Meg said, "So her thoughts are fuzzy enough that I can tune them out. We ate lunch together every day, and sometimes we might talk a little, but we didn't really hang out, except at other things where people all sit with their friends and we're left alone."

"Like pep rallies," I said. "I saw you there."

"One day, I just couldn't take it that no one listened to me about Cliff, so I told them, and I told them what else I knew," Meg said. "That's when we came up with the plan."

"Well, it sounds like you're friends now," I said. "It takes a lot of trust to go in together on something like this. You believed what Meg heard, and you believed Michelle and Carrie could get you in without getting in trouble."

They looked at each other, and the three of them shrugged, almost in unison. "I guess," Carrie said.

"You could even get wild and crazy and consider hanging out away from school and see what happens. Having friends makes high school more bearable. It's just not capers that go better with teamwork." I grinned with the sudden solution to our other problem. "And I think I know how Cliff is getting away with his crimes."

Chapter Fifteen

The three girls stared at me expectantly. I waited for a challenge, but they seemed to be willing to listen to what I had to say. “Does Cliff have friends?” I asked.

“Yeah, there’s a crew he hangs with,” Meg said. “They’re jerks, like him. I think most of their dads work for his dad, so I’m not even sure how much they like him or if they just hang around with him because of their dads and because he has power over them. It’s hard to ditch a friend when your dad works for his dad.”

“Then maybe he’s doing what you’re doing and teaming up. It’s not the same robber every time, so each of them has an alibi for some of the robberies. The videos they showed you really may have been of other people. They weren’t the same person who robbed your store, even though they did the same things. Are his friends about the same size—height and weight?”

“I think so,” Carrie said. “I could easily tell them apart at school, but I bet if you put a ski mask on them and put them in similar clothes, it would be hard to tell. Side-by-side, maybe. There might be an inch or so in height and one might be thinner or broader in the shoulders. But one at a time, it would be really hard.”

“It’s been Cliff every time for me,” Meg said. “I’m sure of that.”

“Because he wants to mess with you,” I said. “But then he’d throw things off by having his friends hit the other places. Do you know if any of his friends have any beefs with the kids who work

at the other convenience stores or at the fast-food places?”

“That would require us paying any attention to that bunch,” Michelle said.

“Didn’t Gary used to date Tania, who works at the burger place?” Carrie said.

“Maybe,” Meg said. “But this would explain a lot. It doesn’t make it any easier to catch them, since we still don’t have evidence.”

“What we need is a sting,” I said. “We need to catch at least one of them in the act. Then there would be evidence. They’re using toy guns, right?”

“Cliff is,” Meg said. “That’s part of what he’s thinking about while he’s in the store, that no one will know who he is, and even if they do, there’s not a lot of trouble he can get into because it’s not a real gun and he’s not taking much. It’s like he’s giving himself a pep talk the whole time. He’s so pathetic.”

“Then there shouldn’t be much risk in locking the door and not letting him out while we wait for the police. Does he think about these robberies at school?”

“Sometimes,” Meg said.

“So, if you know he’s coming, be ready for him. I can help. If I get evidence, then I can give it to the police and do a story.” I knew Wes couldn’t set up a stakeout based on reading the robber’s mind, but there was nothing stopping me from hanging out in a convenience store or fast-food joint and happening to be there to identify the robber.

Meg smiled for the first time. “I think it could work!” she said.

“I could also lurk, maybe serve as lookout, and they won’t notice me,” Carrie said.

“I could fry the getaway car, or I could set off the store alarm while your hands are up,” Michelle put in.

“Maybe if I do something that bothers Cliff, that’ll make him want to get back at me by robbing my store,” Meg said. “I’m working Monday night.”

"It sounds like we have a plan," I said. "But for now, let's put together your statement for the newspaper." I found a notebook, and we worked together on a statement I could print in the newspaper to end the Secret Santa caper.

"How did you catch us, anyway?" Carrie asked when we were through.

"The alarm didn't go off, so how did you even know we were here?" Michelle said.

"She's got a gift of her own," Meg said. "I can't read her. But you're not from Stirling Mills."

"Remember, the people who had gifts came here from somewhere else," I said. "The gifts are concentrated here, but they have to exist in other places, too."

"You're not another mind reader, are you?" Meg asked, frowning. Then she shook her head. "No, you would have asked different questions. But you've got something that means you've got a block. That's probably why Wes likes you. He doesn't have to hear all your thoughts."

"Let's just say that I have something non-electronic that lets me know what's going on in this building."

"Hey, no fair, you know what our gifts are," Carrie said.

"I figured out what your gifts are," I pointed out. "You didn't tell me. It's up to you to guess mine. And now you three need to get home. What do your parents think about you being gone in the middle of the night?"

"My parents barely notice me when I'm home," Carrie said.

"I can get in and out without disarming the security system," Michelle said.

"My parents sleep like the dead," Meg said. "But for tonight, we're having a slumber party. The parents all think we're at someone else's house."

"Maybe we could have a real slumber party one day," Michelle said, a note of hope in her voice.

"That might actually be fun," Carrie said.

“Maybe,” Meg said. She sounded the least enthusiastic about the idea of having friends.

I gave them my business card and they agreed to let me know when the next robbery was likely to be, then I saw them out before I set the alarm once more and made sure everything was in order. “It worked!” Jean said, appearing in the office once the girls were gone. “We know who the Santa is, though it’s not what I expected.”

“Yeah, that was a real surprise,” I said. “Though it does make sense. A mind reader who works at a gas station convenience store is bound to pick up a lot of information. People are usually there one at a time, so she knows whose thoughts she’s hearing, and people are thinking about where they’ve been or where they’re going.”

“You’re not going to write a story about them, are you?” I couldn’t tell whether or not she sounded disappointed in me.

“I’m not going to reveal their identity, but I am going to issue a statement saying they’re going to stop and that people should support the newspaper Secret Santa project to help fulfill wishes and needs. But we are going to try to catch the Sweet Tooth Bandit.”

“Good. That’ll make a story.”

I certainly hoped so.

MEG CALLED me on Monday afternoon. “Cliff’s going to hit my store tonight,” she said.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. I said something to him that I knew would get under his skin, and he thought, ‘I’ll show you tonight, Meg.’ I think that’s a pretty good sign.”

“Are you certain he doesn’t know about your gift? Could he be setting you up?”

“Pretty sure. Before he became a jerk, I was thinking about

telling him about me, but then he made fun of someone else who talked about their gift. He didn't believe in any of that stuff. And I've never caught him thinking about knowing about it, even when he doesn't know I'm around. Given some of the stuff he does think about me, I can't imagine that he'd be able to keep himself from thinking that one thing, and he'd do a better job at censoring himself around me. There's so much I could bust him for if I told anyone."

"Okay, then. We'll trap him tonight. What time do you think we should get there?"

"I go to work at six. I hope he hits early so we can get it over with. I only work until ten on school nights."

I was to pick up Carrie on my way over so her car wouldn't be seen anywhere near the store. Michelle lived near the store, so she was going to bicycle over. I had to admit to being somewhat relieved about that, since I'd already had car trouble thanks to a person with that electrical talent.

Carrie was bubbling with excitement when she met me on the corner nearest her house. I wasn't entirely comfortable driving around with a kid who was clearly hiding what she was doing from her parents, but she insisted she was over eighteen, and the odds were that no one would notice her in my car. I let her off down the street from the store. She would go in first and take up a position near the door. She'd be able to lock it without being noticed once the bandit got there.

I parked at the fast-food place next door, made sure no one was watching, then walked to the convenience store. There were a couple of cars at gas pumps, but none parked in front of the store. The door chimed as I entered. I had to look twice to notice Carrie standing at the magazine rack adjacent to the counter, thumbing through a celebrity gossip rag. Meg sat behind the counter, a textbook open on the counter in front of her. She glanced up when the door chimed, then returned to her homework without acknowledging me.

I headed for the soda fountain that was on the far side of the store, directly opposite the front door and next to the hallway that led to the restrooms. There was a truly astonishing array of sodas, plus you could customize your drink with flavor syrups. A snack food display hid that area from the door, so I figured it would be a good place to lurk while still looking like a legitimate customer. It could take me hours to decide what I wanted to drink and how I wanted to put it together, so I could stand there holding an empty cup and pretend to be making a decision whenever anyone came in.

The door chimed, and I jumped behind the display. When the lights flickered, I realized it was just Michelle. Her voice calling out, "It's me," verified my suspicion. I stepped out of my hiding place as she asked, "Where should I go?"

"How close do you have to be to the alarm to trigger it?" Meg asked.

"I think I can get anything in the building. I can't really aim. I can just send a surge. If I'm scared enough, I don't have a lot of control over it. It'll happen anyway."

"Maybe stay in the hallway by the restrooms," Meg suggested. "That's near the fuse box and the alarm control box."

"Good idea. If I touch them, I can affect them without the kind of surge that might affect your phones. It's probably best if someone can make a call, just in case."

"I don't think we're in any real danger," Meg said, rolling her eyes. "I just want to scare Cliff into stopping and give him a taste of his own medicine. I don't even care about him being arrested. I just want enough evidence that he's behind it that he'll have to quit doing it if he doesn't want real trouble."

After half an hour of waiting, I gained a new appreciation for Jordan's mix of holiday music that played on a loop downtown. At least I liked that music when I wasn't hearing it constantly and always in the same order. The store's sound system played holiday music, but it was tinny electronic instrumental music that sounded

like a high-tech version of someone picking out the melody on a child's xylophone. I could barely identify the songs. They all sounded more or less the same. The music was the audio equivalent of the halfheartedly sprayed fake snow and single strand of colored lights on the front window of the store that were the only attempt at holiday decor.

"Deck the Halls!" Carrie called out in the game of "name that tune" we were playing. Then she sighed and said, "I don't suppose you could fry the sound system," to Michelle.

"I could try," Michelle said.

"Oh, that's tempting," Meg said. "I am so sick of that music. But I'd probably be blamed. Maybe you can come in and do it some night when I'm not working."

"Hush! I think someone's coming!" Carrie called out from her position by the door.

Michelle ducked back into the hallway and I hid behind the display, peering at the door through a gap between packets of cookies. With the bright lights inside the store, I couldn't see much about the figure approaching. I held my breath as the door opened, then tried not to sigh audibly when it turned out to be a man who wasn't wearing a ski mask. He approached the counter and slid a bill toward Meg. "Ten bucks on pump two," he said.

She took the money and pushed some buttons on her register. He went back outside to pump his gas.

"Okay, false alarm," Carrie said. "You don't get a lot of customers here, do you?"

"Most people just pay at the pump and don't come inside," Meg said. "Only people paying cash who have to prepay come in, or else travelers who need a bathroom break and some snacks. Just about everyone who lives in town knows they can get cheaper prices on food if they go down the street to the regular grocery store. In the summer, I get a lot of kids riding their bikes over to get drinks or ice cream. This time of year at night, it's mostly dead. Which is why I like it. No people, and I get paid for sitting here

and doing my homework. I never even got robbed until Cliff and his friends started their thing.”

She was right about it being dead. There was another long stretch with no customers. I didn’t normally drink a lot of soda, but I was curious about some of the flavors, so I bought one and then occupied myself with mixing a concoction. Michelle sat on the floor in the hallway and appeared to be meditating, or possibly dozing. Meg studied her textbook and Carrie continued to name each song as it played. She made up a dance routine to go with the music and sang along. She was actually rather talented, so it was a pity she was unlikely to be noticed, even if she tried to make a go of it. Based on what I knew from the other person I’d met with her talent, she could outshine everyone else at an audition, but then the people judging the audition wouldn’t even remember her.

Meg slammed her textbook closed. “Well, that’s done.” She stretched her back and shoulders. “This job’s less fun when I don’t have a lot of homework.”

“What if he doesn’t show up?” Michelle asked.

“He was planning to,” Meg said. “Maybe something came up, though.”

Carrie looked out through the front window. “There’s not even much traffic tonight. Did you hear it might snow this week?”

“It never does when they say it will,” Michelle said with a sigh.

“We don’t get snow here. We just get ice,” Carrie said. “Like earlier this year. That was wild.”

“That was my first day in town,” I said. “I came for my job interview, and I should have been able to get home before the front hit, but then I found the editor dead in the office, so I had to stay to talk to the police, and then it was too late to get back to Dallas, and I got stuck here for days.”

“That must have been when you met Wes,” Meg said.

“Yeah. I was his initial suspect.”

“Not being able to read you must have driven him crazy. What is the deal with you two, anyway? I was just trying to get under

your skin with those notes. I can't read either of you, so I had to guess."

"We're friends," I said. "We do hang out some. He was the first person in town I met, and we run into each other a lot through work."

"You'd make a cute couple," Carrie said.

"But it would probably lead to a lot of conflict of interest," I said.

"You know I was just making that stuff up," Meg said. "I don't really think that, and I haven't picked up on anyone else who does."

"I have," I said.

It seemed they didn't know what to say to that because we resumed our silence, broken occasionally by Carrie singing along with the sound system. She tried to get the rest of us to join in, but I was in no mood for a singalong. Meg just rolled her eyes. "I'm not that big a fan of Christmas," she said.

"Really?" Carrie asked.

"I usually know what I'm getting. There are no surprises. Meanwhile, I know exactly what everyone else wants, so I give great gifts, but no one gets me what I want. I know why now, and I know not everyone can read minds like I do, but I didn't understand that when I was a kid. Christmas was always just a big disappointment. I liked Thanksgiving better. No gifts or surprises, just family, food, and some of the fun Christmas stuff, like putting up lights."

I realized then that this was probably Wes's problem with Christmas, too. I wondered if there was anything I could do to help him get past it, or if I should even try. There was no law that said Christmas had to be anyone's favorite holiday, and in spite of what the movies often showed, there was no one right way to enjoy the season. The more I pushed him about it, the less likely he was to have positive feelings about Christmas. I pondered this as I listened to Carrie singing along with the store's music.

Carrie stopped in mid-verse of “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” to say, “Someone’s walking up. They didn’t park at a pump. This could be it.” She flattened herself against the stack of foam coolers in front of the window so she couldn’t be seen from outside. Michelle blinked awake, stood, and moved closer to the alarm control box, and I put down my soda to get out my phone while I hid behind the snack food display. If this wasn’t the bandit, I was going to buy a packet of those cookies because looking at them for so long was making me hungry.

The door opened, the chimes ringing in a tone that clashed with the music, and a man entered. He wore nondescript clothes, just jeans and a jacket that could have come from anywhere, but the ski mask over his head would have made him stand out in any crowd in a place where it wasn’t snowing. It was cold, but not cold enough for a ski mask. He held a gun in his hand. This was it!

I got out my phone to record the incident. Carrie reached over and locked the door.

“Hands up!” the man said, pointing the gun at Meg. “Don’t move. Don’t hit the alarm.”

She complied, doing a good job of looking scared.

“Okay, nobody has to get hurt,” he said. “Just do what I say.”

I caught Carrie’s eye, and she nodded. That was our signal to act. She moved up behind the guy to grab his ski mask while I got in position to record the unmasking. This should get us proof of who the robber was.

Just as Carrie reached for the mask and I left my hiding place, Meg called out, “No! It’s not him!”

It was too late. Carrie had already grabbed the mask and ripped it off his head. It wasn’t Cliff. It wasn’t one of his friends, either. It was an adult man, maybe in his late twenties, but hard living made him look older. We seemed to have caught a real robber, with a real gun, and that gun was pointed right at me.

Chapter Sixteen

I gulped, not sure how to handle this. So many scenarios went through my brain while I was frozen in time, seeing nothing but the end of that gun. It occurred to me that this stakeout might not have been the best idea I'd ever had. I thought the guy was going to shoot me when he saw me recording him with my phone and braced myself, wondering if I had time to duck and what it would feel like to be shot, but at that moment, the store's alarm went off, and he turned his attention to Meg. "I told you not to move," he said. My legs felt watery with relief once that gun was turned away from me, and I moved back behind the display. Not that single-serving packets of cookies were likely to be much protection from a bullet. I just felt better with something between the gun and me.

"I didn't do it!" Meg said. "My hands have been up the whole time. Sometimes it just goes off like that. It must be a short circuit."

"Shut it off!" he demanded.

"I can't. Once it's triggered, it's done. It's already notified the police."

"Shut off the sound, then. I can't take all that noise."

I hated to admit it, but I had to agree with him. The alarm was putting everyone on edge, and I didn't think it helped the situation. Meg gave Michelle a quick glance and a subtle nod, and the noise soon stopped. "The police have still been called. They'll be here soon," Meg said, and I hoped she was telling the truth. My big

concern was that the Sweet Tooth Bandit had created a “boy who cried wolf” situation, so the cops would assume it was yet another candy bar being stolen at the point of a toy gun and wouldn’t treat this like a real emergency.

The robber didn’t seem to have noticed Carrie, in spite of her having grabbed his mask. She got to the door and unlocked it, since we didn’t want to be stuck with a gunman who felt trapped, and we definitely wanted someone else to be able to come in.

“I’ve already got video of your face,” I told the guy as I forced myself to leave my hiding place. I hoped I could keep his attention away from Carrie so she could run for help. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a way to signal that she should do so, and she stood frozen near the door. Or maybe trying to run might not be such a great idea. The robber might not notice her moving, but the door chimed when it opened, and he would notice that. Still, I kept talking. “I’m streaming this, so there’s no point in destroying or taking my phone. It’s already out there online where people can see it, and I’m the town’s newspaper editor, so I have a big following.” All of that was actually a lie, but he couldn’t know that. “You’re better off getting out of here before the police arrive, and then probably leaving the county, since they’ll know who you are. Right now, all you’ve done is point a gun, but if you take anything or hurt anyone, that’ll make it a bigger crime. Leave now, and you might not end up in prison.” I felt responsible for the girls because this had been my idea. If they got hurt because of my stupid plan, I’d never be able to forgive myself. I wasn’t sure the town—or Wes—would forgive me, either. Dating Wes would be nothing compared to getting a local girl killed when it came to public opinion.

He hesitated, and I saw desperation in his eyes. He needed whatever he was going to steal, but he was also afraid of being caught.

“I don’t have access to a lot of cash,” Meg said. “Maybe about ten bucks for giving change, and a lot of that’s in quarters.”

He swore and lowered his gun, turning to go. I held my breath,

unwilling to relax until I was sure he was gone and we were in the clear.

Before he made it to the door, it opened and another masked man entered, a gun in his hand. The robber saw that gun and raised his own to point it at the newcomer. “Whoa!” the newcomer said.

He started to back away, but the robber snarled, “Get in here, and put your gun down.”

The newcomer must have had a surge of bravado because he said, “You put your gun down.”

“Your gun isn’t real, idiot,” the robber said.

“Oh yeah?” the newcomer replied. He raised his gun, pointed it at the robber’s face, and pulled the trigger.

I wasn’t sure what to expect. There wasn’t a bang or a pop or anything that sounded like gunfire, but the robber swore and lunged for the newcomer. At that moment, the lights went out. I heard a scuffle near the door. I slid my phone into my jacket pocket, picked up the soda I’d put down, and made my way toward the combatants. In the light coming from outside, I spotted the guy without a mask, grabbed the back of his collar, and poured my soda, ice and all, down the back of his neck. He gave a high-pitched yelp and jumped. The distraction was enough to allow the other robber to tackle him.

The shop lit up as headlights shone in from outside. Chimes rang as the door opened, and a police officer entered. “Okay, what’s going on here?” he demanded. I relaxed somewhat when I recognized Wes’s voice. The cavalry had arrived.

The lights came back on, revealing the maskless robber lying on the floor. Blue liquid dripped off his face, leaving a faint stain on his skin. The other robber knelt on his chest, still wearing his mask.

“That guy tried to rob us,” Meg said. “Not the one in the mask. The other one. But then the guy in the mask showed up and helped. Helped us, I mean, not the robber.”

Wes noticed the gun lying on the floor and kicked it well out of reach. "You, drop your gun, too," he ordered the one still in a mask.

"It's not real," he said, but he still complied with the order.

Carrie yanked the ski mask off the guy kneeling on the robber. "Behold, the Sweet Tooth Bandit!" she cried. The guy she revealed was Cliff Raglan.

"See! I told you," Meg cried out in triumph.

"Hey, I didn't do anything," Cliff protested.

"Because the guy with the real gun got here first," Meg said.

"Yeah, and you're lucky I got here," Cliff said.

"The guy was on his way out when you got here. You just made things worse."

"I caught the guy!"

"Whoa, time out," Wes said, making a T out of his hands. "Can anyone slow down, start at the beginning, and explain what happened here?"

"This guy showed up with a gun," Meg said. "We thought he was the Sweet Tooth Bandit, so we didn't take him seriously and unmasked him, then realized he was for real. But he got unmasked, so I guess he got spooked and was leaving when the actual Sweet Tooth Bandit showed up and shot him in the face with a squirt gun, and then the lights went out and the fake bandit tackled the real one, and then you got here."

"I have it on video, if that helps," I said.

Wes blinked and turned, just then noticing me for the first time. "Lex, what are you doing here?" He took a few steps toward me before he appeared to realize what he was doing and stopped. Then he shook his head. "Though I shouldn't be surprised. You're always there when something happens."

"I was getting a soda," I said. "But I ended up pouring it down his back."

"You just happened to be here when a real robber hit the place?"

“They don’t call me Lucky Lexie for nothing.”

“And the Sweet Tooth Bandit showed up at the same time?”

“Hey, I couldn’t have planned that if I’d tried. It’s not like I sent out a calendar invitation to arrange the meeting.”

“You came all the way out here to get a soda? I’m not sure I’ve ever even seen you drink a soda.”

“Have you seen the selection here?” I gestured toward the soda counter. “You can customize a soda to create your own unique blend. They have flavor syrups.”

“We do have the best soda fountain in town,” Meg said.

“You poured a soda down the neck of a man holding a gun?” Wes asked. “You could have been shot!”

He sounded angry enough that I wanted to flinch, but I stood my ground and tried not to let it show that he’d alarmed me. “I distracted him enough that Cliff was able to tackle him and knock the gun out of his hand so that we wouldn’t have been in danger, even if you hadn’t shown up when you did,” I replied.

“This isn’t over,” he said to me. “We’ll talk about this later.”

A number of sarcastic responses popped into my head, but I restrained myself and said nothing. I figured he’d calm down later, and I’d done nothing wrong. There was nothing he could arrest me for.

Wes turned to the two men on the floor and motioned for Cliff to move aside. “But don’t go anywhere,” he warned. “I’m not through with you.” He ordered the robber to roll over and cuffed him before standing and facing Cliff. “I take it you were the Sweet Tooth Bandit all along.”

“Like I told you,” Meg said. Now that I saw her and Wes together, the resemblance was obvious. I should have figured out that they were related a long time ago. “Him and his friends. I think they took turns so that they all had alibis for some of the robberies.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Cliff protested. “I helped take down that guy.”

"You came to a convenience store wearing a ski mask," Wes said.

"It's cold. They say we might get snow."

"And carrying a gun."

"It's a squirt pistol. This was the first time I ever fired it. I never hurt anyone. You don't have any evidence that I was the one in the store any of these other times. You just know I'm here now, when I didn't threaten anyone other than the guy who was robbing the store when I got here."

I'd been ready to give the guy a break, since he did come to our rescue and even took a risk in tackling an armed man, but trying to weasel out of what he'd been doing put him back on my naughty list. Unfortunately, I suspected he was right. The presence of the real robber had ruined our plan. We'd hoped to expose Cliff after he'd pointed his gun at Meg and demanded something, but now we had no evidence of anything other than maybe poor judgment, and the prisons would overflow if that ever became a crime.

"Your presence here in a ski mask and with a gun, toy or otherwise, and the fact that you match the description of the Sweet Tooth Bandit give me probable cause to put you under surveillance," Wes said. "So you'd better watch your step. The next time you try one of these stunts, we'll be watching you, and we'll get you for it."

"So I can go?"

"No. I'm going to need to get statements from all of you."

"He attacked me!" the robber said. "I didn't do anything to him, so it wasn't self-defense, and he shot me in the face."

"With a water pistol," Cliff said.

"Still, it was an assault. I want to press charges."

"You really think that charges against a guy who came to the rescue when a group of women was being held at gunpoint would stick?" Wes said. "Try that, and you'll just annoy the judge." He frowned at the guy. "Aren't you Virgil Starr? I didn't recognize you without your beard. And looking like a Smurf. We've brought you

in before. I believe you're looking at your third strike. I warned you to get away from the meth."

"I look like a Smurf?"

"There was blue food coloring in the water," Cliff said. "It'll wear off. And it's fainter than I thought it would be."

"I'd have been so mad at you if you'd shot me with that," Meg said.

We gave Wes preliminary statements and I showed him the footage on my phone. He said he'd follow up with us and told me to send him the video. Then he put Virgil in the back of his vehicle and drove away. Cliff left at the same time. "Well, that didn't go as planned," I said to the girls when it was just us in the store once more.

"I can't believe Cliff's going to get away with it," Meg said. "That guy is such a weasel."

"But it looks like he won't be doing it again," I said. "At least not if he's at all smart."

"It would be just like him to send one of his friends to do another robbery, just to taunt the police. Ugh. I hate that guy. And to think that I was grateful to him for about thirty seconds when he came to our rescue. But he had to ruin it by opening his mouth."

"At least nobody got hurt," Michelle said.

"I guess you're going to have to clean that up," Carrie said, indicating the soda and bluish water on the floor.

"We can help," Michelle said.

"I'm not gonna try to talk you out of it. The mop's in the back corner, by the bathrooms," Meg said.

It was my soda, so I probably should have done the mopping, but the girls seemed pretty eager, so I let them do it. It was nice to see that they were still working together like friends, even after the excitement was over. "Now I've gotta call my boss and make an official report," Meg said with a sigh as her friends worked. "At least nothing was taken and there was no damage, so I won't get

my pay docked. I'm not sure I want to keep working here if I'm really going to get robbed."

When they had the place tidy, I offered to take Carrie and Michelle home, but they said they were going to stick around. "I don't want to leave Meg here alone after this," Michelle said.

"Thanks, guys," Meg said, her voice shaking a little. "I'll give you a ride home when I get off work."

I left them, feeling good about their friendship. Maybe it would become real and they'd be more than just a group of outcasts working out their grudges.

On a Monday night, the traffic near downtown wasn't too bad, so it didn't take me long to get home. I headed into the office to send the video to Wes. While I waited for it to upload, I looked out the window at the lights. The music playing on the speakers was a pleasant change from the convenience store music. It was good to be back in my Christmas-movie world.

Once the video was on its way, I stepped outside, locking the door behind me, and walked down Main Street, soaking up the atmosphere. I figured the dose of holiday cheer might overwrite the events from earlier in the evening. It was hard to imagine ugliness like armed robbery amid this picture-postcard scene of a small town decked out for Christmas. As Cliff had said, it was cold. It felt Christmassy.

I reached the park and paused to watch the lights moving in time with the music. There were a few families still out, the little kids dancing with the lights or chasing them and playing in the fake snow. They were a reminder that there was joy and good in the world. Hey, even the Sweet Tooth Bandit had played the hero.

"What are you doing out here?" I recognized Wes's voice behind me and turned to see him.

"I guess you have your prisoner processed."

"He'll be spending at least a night in jail. But I wouldn't have thought you'd be out on the town after all that tonight."

"I needed it even more tonight," I said. "It's a palate cleanser to

wipe away all that ugliness.”

He glanced around the park, as though seeing it for the first time. “I guess it does work for that.”

I fought not to smile at the thought that his heart might be growing a bit. Instead of pushing the point, I said, “That guy seemed pretty desperate.”

“He’s got a lot of problems. As does Cliff, though they’re entirely different problems.”

“I suppose it’s too much to hope that Cliff gets scared straight instead of getting bolder because he got away with it.”

“If he’s smart, he’ll know that we’ll be watching him and his accomplices. I may set up someone to stay around that row of businesses and be able to get to the store or restaurant before they can leave, just in case.”

“Listen to Meg. She’ll know if they’re planning something.”

He stepped closer to me and spoke more softly. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I did more damage to him than he did to anyone.”

“Except maybe for me. I’m going to have to clean my car after that guy got soda on the seats. That was good thinking, even if it was dangerous and not something I’d usually recommend in similar circumstances.”

“And a waste of a perfectly good drink. I highly recommend adding vanilla syrup to a cola.”

“Now, what were you really doing there tonight? I know you didn’t drive all the way out there just because you can add vanilla to cola.”

I figured I might as well come clean. “Meg knew Cliff was going to hold her up, so the girls and I were there to catch him in the act and unmask him. We didn’t anticipate a real robber showing up.”

“And how do you know those three?”

I didn’t think I could talk my way around that, and I didn’t want to lie to him. “This is off the record. You aren’t hearing this in your official capacity.”

“Isn’t that my line?”

“Well, it’s working the other way right now. Think of it as an opportunity for you to learn and grow.”

“Okay, off the record. The police part of my brain will not remember this conversation.”

“The three girls are the Secret Santa. Jean caught them breaking into the office, she alerted me, and I caught them about to leave a note. It started with Meg getting upset about not being able to get anyone to believe her about Cliff, so she told the football team what he said about them. Carrie’s got that ‘don’t notice me’ gift, so she was able to slip notes into people’s pockets. It escalated from there, with them using all the things Meg read from people at school and who came into the store. Carrie was able to get people’s keys, Michelle got them past the security system, and Meg played lookout since she’d know when someone was coming or thinking about having heard something. Them working as a team was what made us realize that Cliff must be teaming up with his friends so they’d have alibis, and when Meg heard Cliff planning to hold her up tonight, we decided to lie in wait for him.”

“That’s just, well, wow.” He shook his head in disbelief. “There’s nothing I could do officially about that even if I wanted to.”

“You don’t want to?”

“I don’t know what I could do.”

“They’ve promised they’re not going to do it again. The Secret Santa is done.”

“That’s good to know.” He took a step closer, and his expression softened. “And I’m glad you’re okay.”

The way he looked at me made me shiver and grow warm at the same time. “So am I. I’ll admit, staring down a gun was kind of scary.”

“I suppose I’d be wasting my breath if I told you to be more careful in the future.”

“Most definitely.”

He sighed and shook his head. "Okay, if that's your official position, then I'd like to rethink our agreement."

"Our agreement?"

"To wait before we get more involved. I realized tonight that we never know how much time we'll have. My dad dropped dead even though he appeared to be in perfect health, and there were so many things he'd planned to do that he never got to. What's the difference between us spending time together as friends and dating when it comes to a conflict of interest? I think we both have enough integrity to withstand scrutiny." He frowned. "That is what you were concerned with, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I think." I put my hands in my pockets because they were shaking, and it wasn't just because of the cold. I felt like I was on the precipice of a leap. But why was I afraid to take this leap? I was a big fan of leaps in much of the rest of my life. "And besides, those Secret Santa notes were mostly about your cousin being mad at you for not believing her and me for going along with what you said."

"Well, then." He stepped forward, reached to pull me close, and bent to kiss me. It was a moment right out of one of those Christmas movies, only better because it was happening to me. There were lights and Christmas music all around us, and even the gentle kiss of snowflakes on my cheeks.

Wes pulled back slightly from the kiss, but kept his arms around me. "That fake snow is awfully realistic."

"I'm not sure this is fake." I tilted my head back to look up. The snow was falling from the sky, not being shot into the air by Jordan's machine.

Of course, it always started to snow at the happy ending. I stood on tiptoes so I could kiss Wes as the snowflakes danced around us.

FOR AN EXCLUSIVE SHORT story about the history of Stirling Mills and news about upcoming books, [sign up for the Shanna Swendson mailing list](#).

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Shanna Swendson

The Enchanted, Inc. Series

Enchanted, Inc.

Once Upon Stilettos

Damsel Under Stress

Don't Hex with Texas

Much Ado About Magic

No Quest for the Wicked

Kiss and Spell

Frogs and Kisses

Enchanted Ever After

Enchanted, Inc. Stories

Paint the Town Red

Criminal Enchantment

The Lucky Lexie Mysteries

Interview with a Dead Editor

Case of the Curious Crystals

Mystery of the Drowned Driver

Case of the Vanishing Visitor

Secret of the Haunted Hotel

Case of the Broken Bridge

The Rebels Series

Rebel Mechanics

Rebel Magisters

Rebels Rising

The Fairy Tale Series

A Fairy Tale

To Catch a Queen

A Kind of Magic

Twice Upon a Christmas

Make Mine Magic

Spindled

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

Visit her web site and sign up for her mailing list at shannaswendson.com



OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2022 by Shanna Swendson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design: The Killion Group, Inc.

OceanofPDF.com